

THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

FALL 1950



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The Traitor

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Pamela Pays the Piper

Heritage

and stories by G. WHITLEY, D. GRINNELL, H. SCHOENFELD, H. NEARING, JR.

BILL BROWN

AUGUST DERLETH

ROGER ANGELL

JAMES S. HART

C. M. KORNBLUTH

PHYLLIS LEE PETERSON

CHARLES L. HARNESS

A selection of the best stories of fantasy and science fiction, new and old

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VOLUME I, No. 4

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume I, No. 4, Fall 1950. Published quarterly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, \$1.40 in U. S. and possessions; \$1.80 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. Business and General offices, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter, Oct. 13, 1949, at the Post Office at Concord, N. H. under the Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. Copyright, 1950, by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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The Silly Season

by C. M. KORNBLUTH

It was a hot summer afternoon in the Omaha bureau of the World Wireless Press Service, and the control bureau in New York kept nagging me for copy. But, since it was a hot summer afternoon, there was no copy. A wrapup of local baseball had cleared about an hour ago, and that was that. Nothing but baseball happens in the summer. During the dog days, politicians are in the Maine woods fishing and boozing, burglars are too tired to burgle and wives think it over and decide not to decapitate their husbands.

I pawed through some press releases. One sloppy stencil-duplicated sheet began: "Did you know that the lemonade way to summer comfort and health has been endorsed by leading physiotherapists from Maine to California? The Federated Lemon-Growers Association revealed today that a survey of 2,500 physiotherapists in 57 cities of more than 25,000 population disclosed that 87 per cent of them drink lemonade at least once a day between June and September, and that another 72 per cent not only drink the cooling and healthful beverage but actually prescribe it —"

Another note tapped out on the news circuit printer from New York: "960M-HW KICKER? ND SNST-NY"

That was New York saying they needed a bright and sparkling little news item immediately — “soonest.” I went to the eastbound printer and punched out: “96NY-UPCMNG FU MINS-OM”

The lemonade handout was hopeless; I dug into the stack again. The State University summer course was inviting the governor to attend its summer conference on aims and approaches in adult secondary education. The Agricultural College wanted me to warn ~~farmers~~ farmers that white-skinned hogs should be kept from the direct rays of the summer sun. The manager of a fifth-rate local pug sent a write-up of his boy and a couple of working press passes to his next bout in the Omaha Arena. The Schwartz and White Bandage Company contributed a glossy eight-by-ten of a blonde in a bathing suit improvised from two S. & W. Redi-Dressings.

Accompanying text: “Pert starlet Miff McCoy is ready for any seaside emergency. That’s not only a darling swim suit she has on — it’s two standard all-purpose Redi-Dressing bandages made by the Schwartz and White Bandage Company of Omaha. If a broken rib results from too-strenuous beach athletics, Miff’s dress can supply the dressing.” Yeah. The rest of the stack wasn’t even that good. I dumped them all in the circular file, and began to wrack my brains in spite of the heat.

I’d have to fake one, I decided. Unfortunately, there had been no big running silly season story so far this summer — no flying saucers, or monsters in the Florida Everglades, or chloroform bandits terrifying the city. If there had, I could have hopped on and faked a “with.” As it was, I’d have to fake a “lead,” which is harder and riskier.

The flying saucers? I couldn’t revive them; they’d been forgotten for years, except by newsmen. The giant turtle of Lake Huron had been quiet for years, too. If I started a chloroform bandit scare, every old maid in the state would back me up by swearing she heard the bandit trying to break in and smelled chloroform — but the cops wouldn’t like it. Strange messages from space received at the State University’s radar lab? That might do it. I put a sheet of copy paper in the typewriter and sat, glaring at it and hating the silly season.

There was a slight reprieve — the Western Union tie-line printer by the desk dinged at me and its sickly-yellow bulb lit up. I tapped out: “ww GA PLs,” and the machine began to eject yellow, gummed tape which told me this:

"WU CO62-DPR COLLECT — FT HICKS ARK AUG 22 105P — WORLDWIRELESS OMAHA — TOWN MARSHAL PINKNEY CRAWLES DIED MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES FISHTRIPPING OZARK HAMLET RUSH CITY TODAY. RUSHERS PHONED HICKSERS 'BURNED DEATH SHINING DOMES APPEARED YESTERWEEK.' JEEPING BODY HICKSWARD. QUERIED RUSH CONSTABLE P.C. ALLENBY LEARNING 'SEVEN GLASSY DOMES EACH HOUSESIZE CLEARING MILE SOUTH TOWN. RUSHERS UNTOUCHED, UNAPPROACHED. CRAWLES WARNED BUT TOUCHED AND DIED BURNS.' NOTE DESK — RUSH FONECALL 1.85. SHALL I UPFOLLOW? — BENSON — FISHTRIPPING RUSHERS HICKSERS YESTERWEEK JEEPING HICKSWARD HOUSESIZE 1.85 428P CLR..."

It was just what the doctor ordered. I typed an acknowledgment for the message and pounded out a story, fast. I punched it and started the tape wiggling through the eastbound transmitter before New York could send any more irked notes. The news circuit printer from New York clucked and began relaying my story immediately:

"WW72 (KICKER)

FORT HICKS, ARKANSAS, AUG 22 — (WW) — MYSTERIOUS DEATH TODAY STRUCK DOWN A LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER IN A TINY OZARK MOUNTAIN HAMLET. MARSHAL PINKNEY CRAWLES OF FORT HICKS, ARKANSAS, DIED OF BURNS WHILE ON A FISHING TRIP TO THE LITTLE VILLAGE OF RUSH CITY. TERRIFIED NATIVES OF RUSH CITY BLAMED THE TRAGEDY ON WHAT THEY CALLED 'SHINING DOMES.' THEY SAID THE SO-CALLED DOMES APPEARED IN A CLEARING LAST WEEK ONE MILE SOUTH OF TOWN. THERE ARE SEVEN OF THE MYSTERIOUS OBJECTS — EACH ONE THE SIZE OF A HOUSE. THE INHABITANTS OF RUSH CITY DID NOT DARE APPROACH THEM. THEY WARNED THE VISITING MARSHAL CRAWLES — BUT HE DID NOT HEED THEIR WARNING. RUSH CITY'S CONSTABLE P.C. ALLENBY WAS A WITNESS TO THE TRAGEDY. SAID HE: — 'THERE ISN'T MUCH TO TELL. MARSHAL CRAWLES JUST WALKED UP TO ONE OF THE DOMES AND PUT HIS HAND ON IT. THERE WAS A BIG FLASH, AND WHEN I COULD SEE AGAIN, HE WAS BURNED TO DEATH.' CONSTABLE ALLENBY IS RETURNING THE BODY OF MARSHAL CRAWLES TO FORT HICKS. 602P220M"

That, I thought, should hold them for a while. I remembered Benson's "note desk" and put through a long distance call to Fort Hicks, person to person. The Omaha operator asked for Fort Hicks information, but there wasn't any. The Fort Hicks operator asked whom she wanted. Omaha finally admitted that we wanted to talk to Mr. Edwin C. Benson. Fort

Hicks figured out loud and then decided that Ed was probably at the police station if he hadn't gone home for supper yet. She connected us with the police station, and I got Benson. He had a pleasant voice, not particularly backwoods Arkansas. I gave him some of the old oil about a fine dispatch, and a good, conscientious job, and so on. He took it with plenty of dry reserve, which was odd. Our rural stringers always ate that kind of stuff up. Where, I asked him, was he from?

"Fort Hicks," he told me, "but I've moved around. I did the courthouse beat in Little Rock —" I nearly laughed out loud at that, but the laugh died out as he went on — "rewrite for the A.P. in New Orleans, got to be bureau chief there but I didn't like wire service work. Got an opening on the Chicago Trib desk. That didn't last — they sent me to head up their Washington bureau. There I switched to the New York Times. They made me a war correspondent and I got hurt — back to Fort Hicks. I do some magazine writing now. Did you want a follow-up on the Rush City story?"

"Sure," I told him weakly. "Give it a real ride — use your own judgment. Do you think it's a fake?"

"I saw Pink's body a little while ago at the undertaker's parlor, and I had a talk with Allenby, from Rush City. Pink got burned, all right, and Allenby didn't make his story up. Maybe somebody else did — he's pretty dumb — but as far as I can tell, this is the real thing. I'll keep the copy coming. Don't forget about that dollar eighty-five phone call, will you?"

I told him I wouldn't, and hung up. Mr. Edwin C. Benson had handed me quite a jolt. I wondered how badly he had been hurt, that he had been forced to abandon a brilliant news career and bury himself in the Ozarks.

Then there came a call from God, the board chairman of World Wireless. He was fishing in Canada, as all good board chairmen do during the silly season, but he had caught a news broadcast which used my Rush City story. He had a mobile phone in his trailer, and it was but the work of a moment to ring Omaha and louse up my carefully-planned vacation schedules and rotation of night shifts. He wanted me to go down to Rush City and cover the story personally. I said yes and began trying to round up the rest of the staff. My night editor was sobered up by his wife and delivered to the bureau in fair shape. A telegrapher on vacation was reached at his summer resort and talked into checking out. I got a taxi company on the phone

and told them to have a cross-country cab on the roof in an hour. I specified their best driver, and told them to give him maps of Arkansas.

Meanwhile, two "with domes" dispatches arrived from Benson and got moved on the wire. I monitored a couple of newscasts; the second one carried a story by another wire service on the domes — a pickup of our stuff, but they'd have their own men on the scene fast enough. I filled in the night editor, and went up to the roof for the cab.

The driver took off in the teeth of a gathering thunderstorm. We had to rise above it, and by the time we could get down to sight-pilotage altitude, we were lost. We circled most of the night until the driver picked up a beacon he had on his charts at about 3:30 A.M. We landed at Fort Hicks as day was breaking, not on speaking terms.

Fort Hicks' field clerk told me where Benson lived, and I walked there. It was a white, frame house. A quiet, middle-aged woman let me in. She was his widowed sister, Mrs. McHenry. She got me some coffee and told me she had been up all night waiting for Edwin to come back from Rush City. He had started out about 8:00 P.M., and it was only a two-hour trip by car. She was worried. I tried to pump her about her brother, but she'd only say that he was the bright one of the family. She didn't want to talk about his work as war correspondent. She did show me some of his magazine stuff — boy-and-girl stories in national weeklies. He seemed to sell one every couple of months.

We had arrived at a conversational stalemate when her brother walked in, and I discovered why his news career had been interrupted. He was blind. Aside from a long, puckered brown scar that ran from his left temple back over his ear and onto the nape of his neck, he was a pleasant-looking fellow in his mid-forties.

"Who is it, Vera?" he asked.

"It's Mr. Williams, the gentleman who called you from Omaha today — I mean yesterday."

"How do you do, Williams. Don't get up," he added — hearing, I suppose, the chair squeak as I leaned forward to rise.

"You were so *long*, Edwin," his sister said with relief and reproach.

"That young jackass Howie — my chauffeur for the night —" he added an aside to me — "got lost going there and coming back. But I did spend more time than I'd planned at Rush City." He sat down, facing me.

"Williams, there is some difference of opinion about the shining ~~domes~~. The Rush City people say that they exist, and I say they don't."

His sister brought him a cup of coffee.

"What happened, exactly?" I asked.

"That Allenby took me and a few other hardy citizens to see them. They told me just what they looked like. Seven hemispheres in a big clearing, glassy, looming up like houses, reflecting the gleam of the headlights. But they weren't there. Not to me, and not to any blind man. I know when I'm standing in front of a house or anything else that big. I can feel a little tension on the skin of my face. It works unconsciously, but the mechanism is thoroughly understood.

"The blind get — because they have to — an aural picture of the world. We hear a little hiss of air that means we're at the corner of a building, we hear and feel big, turbulent air currents that mean we're coming to a busy street. Some of the boys can thread their way through an obstacle course and never touch a single obstruction. I'm not that good, maybe because I haven't been blind as long as they have, but by hell, I know when there are seven objects the size of houses in front of me, and there just were no such things in the clearing at Rush City."

"Well," I shrugged, "there goes a fine piece of silly-season journalism. What kind of a gag are the Rush City people trying to pull, and why?"

"No kind of gag. My driver saw the domes, too — and don't forget the late marshal. Pink not only saw them but touched them. All I know is that people see them and I don't. If they exist, they have a kind of existence like nothing else I've ever met."

"I'll go up there myself," I decided.

"Best thing," said Benson. "I don't know what to make of it. You can take our car." He gave me directions and I gave him a schedule of deadlines. We wanted the coroner's verdict, due today, an eye-witness story — his driver would do for that — some background stuff on the area and a few statements from local officials.

I took his car and got to Rush City in two hours. It was an unpainted collection of dog-trot homes, set down in the big pine forest that covers all that rolling Ozark country. There was a general store that had the place's only phone. I suspected it had been kept busy by the wire services and a few

enterprising newspapers. A state trooper in a flashy uniform was lounging against a fly-specked tobacco counter when I got there.

"I'm Sam Williams, from World Wireless," I said. "You come to have a look at the domes?"

"World Wireless broke that story, didn't they?" he asked me, with a look I couldn't figure out.

"We did. Our Fort Hicks stringer wired it to us."

The phone rang, and the trooper answered it. It seemed to have been a call to the Governor's office he had placed.

"No, sir," he said over the phone. "No, sir. They're all sticking to the story, but I didn't see anything. I mean, they don't see them any more, but they say they *were* there, and now they aren't any more." A couple more "No, sirs" and he hung up.

"When did that happen?" I asked.

"About a half-hour ago. I just came from there on my bike to report."

The phone rang again, and I grabbed it. It was Benson, asking for me. I told him to phone a flash and bulletin to Omaha on the disappearance and then took off to find Constable Allenby. He was a stage reuben with a nickel-plated badge and a six-shooter. He cheerfully climbed into the car and guided me to the clearing.

There was a definite little path worn between Rush City and the clearing by now, but there was a disappointment at the end of it. The clearing was empty. A few small boys sticking carefully to its fringes told wildly contradictory stories about the disappearance of the domes, and I jotted down some kind of dispatch out of the most spectacular versions. I remember it involved flashes of blue fire and a smell like sulphur candles. That was all there was to it.

I drove Allenby back. By then a mobile unit from a TV network had arrived. I said hello, waited for an A.P. man to finish a dispatch on the phone and then dictated my lead direct to Omaha. The hamlet was beginning to fill up with newsmen from the wire services, the big papers, the radio and TV nets and the newsreels. Much good they'd get out of it. The story was over — I thought. I had some coffee at the general store's two-table restaurant corner and drove back to Fort Hicks.

Benson was tirelessly interviewing by phone and firing off copy to Omaha. I told him he could begin to ease off, thanked him for his fine work,

paid him for his gas, said good-by and picked up my taxi at the field. Quite a bill for waiting had been run up.

I listened to the radio as we were flying back to Omaha, and wasn't at all surprised. After baseball, the shining domes were the top news. Shining domes had been seen in twelve states. Some vibrated with a strange sound. They came in all colors and sizes. One had strange writing on it. One was transparent, and there were big green men and women inside. I caught a women's mid-morning quiz show, and the M.C. kept gagging about the domes. One crack I remember was a switch on the "pointed-head" joke. He made it "dome-shaped head," and the ladies in the audience laughed until they nearly burst.

We stopped in Little Rock for gas, and I picked up a couple of afternoon papers. The domes got banner heads on both of them. One carried the World Wireless lead, and had slapped in the bulletin on the disappearance of the domes. The other paper wasn't a World Wireless client, but between its other services and "special correspondents" — phone calls to the general store at Rush City — it had kept practically abreast of us. Both papers had shining dome cartoons on their editorial pages, hastily drawn and slapped in. One paper, anti-administration, showed the President cautiously reaching out a finger to touch the dome of the Capitol, which was rendered as a shining dome and labeled: "SHINING DOME OF CONGRESSIONAL IMMUNITY TO EXECUTIVE DICTATORSHIP." A little man labeled "Mr. and Mrs. Plain, Self-Respecting Citizens of The United States of America" was in one corner of the cartoon saying: "CAREFUL, MR. PRESIDENT! REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED TO PINKNEY CRAWLES!!"

The other paper, pro-administration, showed a shining dome that had the president's face. A band of fat little men in Prince Albert coats, string ties and broad-brim hats labeled "CONGRESSIONAL SMEAR ARTISTS AND HATCHET-MEN" were creeping up on the dome with the President's face, their hands reached out as if to strangle. Above the cartoon a cutline said: "WHO'S GOING TO GET HURT?"

We landed at Omaha, and I checked into the office. Things were clicking right along. The clients were happily gobbling up our dome copy and sending wires asking for more. I dug into the morgue for the "Flying Disc" folder, and the "Huron Turtle" and the "Bayou Vampire" and a few others even further back. I spread out the old clippings and tried to shuffle and

arrange them into some kind of underlying sense. I picked up the latest dispatch to come out of the tie-line printer from Western Union. It was from our man in Owosso, Michigan, and told how Mrs. Lettie Overholtzer, age 61, saw a shining dome in her own kitchen at midnight. It grew like a soap bubble until it was as big as her refrigerator, and then disappeared.

I went over to the desk man and told him: "Let's have a downhold on stuff like Lettie Overholtzer. We can move a sprinkling of it, but I don't want to run this into the ground. Those things might turn up again, and then we wouldn't have any room left to play around with them. We'll have everybody's credulity used up."

He looked mildly surprised. "You mean," he asked, "there really *was* something there?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I didn't see anything myself, and the only man down there I trust can't make up his mind. Anyhow, hold it down as far as the clients let us."

I went home to get some sleep. When I went back to work, I found the clients hadn't let us work the downhold after all. Nobody at the other wire services seemed to believe seriously that there had been anything out of the ordinary at Rush City, so they merrily pumped out solemn stories like the Lettie Overholtzer item, and wirefoto maps of locations where domes were reported, and tabulations of number of domes reported.

We had to string along. Our Washington bureau badgered the Pentagon and the A.E.C. into issuing statements, and there was a race between a Navy and an Air Force investigating mission to see who could get to Rush City first. After they got there there was a race to see who could get the first report out. The Air Force won that contest. Before the week was out, "Domies" had appeared. They were hats for juveniles — shining-dome skull caps moulded from a transparent plastic. We had to ride with it. I'd started the mania, but it was out of hand and a long time dying down.

The World Series, the best in years, finally killed off the domes. By an unspoken agreement among the services, we simply stopped running stories every time a hysterical woman thought she saw a dome or wanted to get her name in the paper. And, of course, when there was no longer publicity to be had for the asking, people stopped seeing domes. There was no percentage in it. Brooklyn won the Series, international tension climbed as the thermometer dropped, burglars began burgling again, and a bulky folder labeled

"DOMES, SHINING," went into our morgue. The shining domes were history, and earnest graduate students in psychology would shortly begin to bother us with requests to borrow that folder.

The only thing that had come of it, I thought, was that we had somehow got through another summer without too much idle wire time, and that Ed Benson and I had struck up a casual correspondence.

A newsman's strange and weary year wore on. Baseball gave way to football. An off-year election kept us on the run. Christmas loomed ahead, with its feature stories and its kickers about Santa Claus, Indiana. Christmas passed, and we began to clear jolly stories about New Year hangovers, and tabulate the great news stories of the year. New Year's day, a ghastly rat-race of covering 103 bowl games. Record snowfalls in the Great Plains and Rockies. Spring floods in Ohio and the Columbia River Valley. Twenty-one tasty Lenten menus, and Holy Week around the world. Baseball again, Daylight Saving Time, Mother's Day, Derby Day, the Preakness and the Belmont Stakes.

It was about then that a disturbing letter arrived from Benson. I was concerned not about its subject matter but because I thought no sane man would write such a thing. It seemed to me that Benson was slipping his trolley. All he said was that he expected a repeat performance of the domes, or of something like the domes. He said "they" probably found the try-out a smashing success and would continue according to plan. I replied cautiously, which amused him.

He wrote back: "I wouldn't put myself out on a limb like this if I had anything to lose by it, but you know my station in life. It was just an intelligent guess, based on a study of power politics and Aesop's fables. And if it does happen, you'll find it a trifle harder to put over, won't you?"

I guessed he was kidding me, but I wasn't certain. When people begin to talk about "them" and what "they" are doing, it's a bad sign. But, guess or not, something pretty much like the domes did turn up in late July, during a crushing heat wave.

This time it was big black spheres rolling across the countryside. The spheres were seen by a Baptist congregation in central Kansas which had met in a prairie to pray for rain. About eighty Baptists took their Bible oaths that they saw large black spheres some ten feet high, rolling along

the prairie. They had passed within five yards of one man. The rest had run from them as soon as they could take in the fact that they really were there.

World Wireless didn't break that story, but we got on it fast enough as soon as we were tipped. Being now the recognized silly season authority in the W.W. Central Division, I took off for Kansas.

It was much the way it had been in Arkansas. The Baptists really thought they had seen the things — with one exception. The exception was an old gentleman with a patriarchal beard. He had been the one man who hadn't run, the man the objects passed nearest to. He was blind. He told me with a great deal of heat that he would have known all about it, blind or not, if any large spheres had rolled within five yards of him, or twenty-five for that matter.

Old Mr. Emerson didn't go into the matter of air currents and turbulence, as Benson had. With him, it was all well below the surface. He took the position that the Lord had removed his sight, and in return had given him another sense which would do for emergency use.

"You just try me out, son!" he piped angrily. "You come stand over here, wait a while and put your hand up in front of my face. I'll tell you when you do it, no matter how quiet you are!" He did it, too, three times, and then took me out into the main street of his little prairie town. There were several wagons drawn up before the grain elevator, and he put on a show for me by threading his way around and between them without touching once.

That — and Benson — seemed to prove that whatever the things were, they had some connection with the domes. I filed a thoughtful dispatch on the blind-man angle, and got back to Omaha to find that it had been cleared through our desk but killed in New York before relay.

We tried to give the black spheres the usual ride, but it didn't last as long. The political cartoonists tired of it sooner, and fewer old maids saw them. People got to jeering at them as newspaper hysteria, and a couple of high-brow magazines ran articles on "the irresponsible press." Only the radio comedians tried to milk the new mania as usual, but they were disconcerted to find their ratings fall. A network edict went out to kill all sphere gags. People were getting sick of them.

"It makes sense," Benson wrote to me. "An occasional exercise of the

sense of wonder is refreshing, but it can't last forever. That plus the ingrained American cynicism toward all sources of public information has worked against the black spheres being greeted with the same naïve delight with which the domes were received. Nevertheless, I predict — and I'll thank you to remember that my predictions have been right so far 100 per cent of the time — that next summer will see another mystery comparable to the domes and the black things. And I also predict that the new phenomenon will be imperceptible to any blind person in the immediate vicinity, if there should be any."

If, of course, he was wrong this time, it would only cut his average down to fifty per cent. I managed to wait out the year — the same interminable round I felt I could do in my sleep. Staffers got ulcers and resigned, staffers got tired and were fired, libel suits were filed and settled, one of our desk men got a Nieman Fellowship and went to Harvard, one of our telegraphers got his working hand mashed in a car door and jumped from a bridge but lived with a broken back.

In Mid-August, when the weather bureau had been correctly predicting "fair and warmer" for 16 straight days, it turned up. It wasn't anything on whose nature a blind man could provide a negative check, but it had what I had come to think of as "their" trade-mark.

A summer seminar was meeting outdoors, because of the frightful heat, at our own State University. Twelve trained school teachers testified that a series of perfectly circular pits opened up in the grass before them, one directly under the education professor teaching the seminar. They testified further that the professor, with an astonished look and a heart-rending cry, plummeted down into that perfectly circular pit. They testified further that the pits remained there for some 30 seconds and then suddenly were there no longer. The scorched summer grass was back where it had been, the pits were gone and so was the professor.

I interviewed every one of them. They weren't yokels, but grown men and women, all with Masters' degrees, working toward their doctorates during the summers. They agreed closely on their stories as I would expect trained and capable persons to do.

The police, however, did not expect agreement, being used to dealing with the lower-I.Q. brackets. They arrested the twelve on some technical charge — "obstructing peace officers in the performance of their duties,"

I believe — and were going to beat the living hell out of them when an attorney arrived with twelve writs of habeas corpus. The cops' unvoiced suspicion was that the teachers had conspired to murder their professor, but nobody ever tried to explain why they'd do a thing like that.

The cops' reaction was typical of the way the public took it. Newspapers — which had reveled wildly in the shining domes story and less so in the black spheres story — were cautious. Some went overboard and gave the black pits a ride, in the old style, but they didn't pick up any sales that way. People declared that the press was insulting their intelligence, and also they were bored with marvels.

The few papers who played up the pits were soundly spanked in very dignified editorials printed by other sheets which played down the pits.

At World Wireless, we sent out a memo to all stringers: "File no more enterpriser dispatches on black pit story. Mail queries should be sent to regional desk if a new angle breaks in your territory." We got about ten mail queries, mostly from journalism students acting as string men, and we turned them all down. All the older hands got the pitch, and didn't bother to file it to us when the town drunk or the village old maid loudly reported that she saw a pit open up on High Street across from the drug store. They knew it was probably untrue, and that furthermore nobody cared.

I wrote Benson about all this, and humbly asked him what his prediction for next summer was. He replied, obviously having the time of his life, that there would be at least one more summer phenomenon like the last three, and possibly two more — but none after that.

It's so easy now to reconstruct, with our bitterly-earned knowledge!

Any youngster could whisper now of Benson: "Why, the damned fool! Couldn't anybody with the brains of a louse see that they wouldn't keep it up for two years?" One did whisper that to me the other day, when I told this story to him. And I whispered back that, far from being a damned fool, Benson was the one person on the face of the Earth, as far as I know, who had bridged with logic the widely-separated phenomena with which this reminiscence deals.

Another year passed. I gained three pounds, drank too much, rowed incessantly with my staff and got a tidy raise. A telegrapher took a swing at me midway through the office Christmas party, and I fired him. My wife

and the kids didn't arrive in April when I expected them. I phoned Florida, and she gave me some excuse or other about missing the plane. After a few more missed planes and a few more phone calls, she got around to telling me that she didn't *want* to come back. That was okay with me. In my own intuitive way, I knew that the upcoming silly season was more important than who stayed married to whom.

In July, a dispatch arrived by wire while a new man was working the night desk. It was from Hood River, Oregon. Our stringer there reported that more than one hundred "green capsules" about 50 yards long had appeared in and around an apple orchard. The new desk man was not so new that he did not recall the downhold policy on silly-season items. He killed it, but left it on the spike for my amused inspection in the morning. I suppose exactly the same thing happened in every wire service newsroom in the region. I rolled in at 10:30 and riffled through the stuff on the spike. When I saw the "green capsules" dispatch I tried to phone Portland, but couldn't get a connection. Then the phone buzzed and a correspondent of ours in Seattle began to yell at me, but the line went dead.

I shrugged and phoned Benson, in Fort Hicks. He was at the police station, and asked me: "Is this it?"

"It is," I told him. I read him the telegram from Hood River and told him about the line trouble to Seattle.

"So," he said wonderingly, "I called the turn, didn't I?"

"Called what turn?"

"On the invaders. I don't know who they are — but it's the story of the boy who cried wolf. Only this time, the wolves realized —" Then the phone went dead.

But he was right.

The people of the world were the sheep.

We newsmen — radio, TV, press and wire services — were the boy, who should have been ready to sound the alarm.

But the cunning wolves had tricked us into sounding the alarm so many times that the villagers were weary, and would not come when there was real peril.

The wolves who then were burning their way through the Ozarks, utterly without opposition, the wolves were the Martians under whose yoke and lash we now endure our miserable existences.

We have been trying (as we hope you've noticed) to bring you not only the best writing but the freshest ideas in the fields of fantasy and science fiction. "No mad scientists with beautiful daughters," we vowed as we began assembling stories, "no space pirates, no vampires with virginal victims, no curses on Egyptian tombs." But there is no fantasy concept so outworn that truly creative writing and thinking cannot bring it to life again — as James Hart proved to us by submitting a story of a vampire (complete with virginal victim) as fresh and vivid as though the theme had never been touched before. We shall not be surprised if the next mail brings us a shiny new masterpiece starring a Bug Eyed Monster!

The Traitor

by JAMES S. HART

"MR. LORENZ! So nice you could come."

"Charming of you to invite me." Lorenz held Mrs. Van Nuys' hand briefly.

"I predicted to Henry early in the week," she said poutingly, "that you'd be off on one of those interminable trips and we'd just receive your regrets."

"You have so many," he said, taking in the crowd, "you'd never miss me." Then he looked into her pleasant gray eyes. "But it wasn't fair of you to say my trips probably meant I was being naughty because I was a bachelor."

Lorenz caught the slack amazement of her jaw.

"But we were alone when I . . ." Then she had to go because Clyde, the butler, was announcing the arrival of the Heintzelmanns — he with his fourth wife, she with her fifth husband. Each of the Heintzelmanns would meet a former spouse during dinner, and each would do a turn about the dark grounds for old time's sake with the old-time mate. It generally happened.

Lorenz, rather short, with great breadth of shoulder, but running a little too fat around his middle, edged his way through a throng of exposed flesh dangerously contained in plunging necklines. He stood at the cocktail table and looked back toward the huge double doors to see Mrs. Van Nuys whispering to her husband. About me, Lorenz told himself; I ought to resist those little temptations; they might prove embarrassing, even dangerous.

They were both looking his way, so he had to take up a dry martini and raise it slightly in salutation. When they turned to each other again, he quickly spilled the drink into the champagne punch.

"It won't last, mark my words." The woman standing near him spoke harshly, as though her words were solid things skidding over a rough surface. "She's a veritable nymphomaniac. One man! Ha! Not for her." The woman's embonpoint once had been a feature that turned men's heads in admiration; it had developed to such that it now made them swivel with amazement. "My dear Lorenz," she grated loudly. "You don't favor us often. Skippy. Mr. Lorenz. Skippy Lowenthal."

"Oh, we know one another, Biffie." The young man was very tall and he took his eyes off the lady's facade only long enough to look down a long nose at Lorenz. Protected by a large potted plant behind them, he was resting his left hand on the curve of her back. Lorenz thought it could be that the cadaverous youth needed to touch her bursting affluence in order to draw sustenance. "Have a cocktail?"

Lorenz shook his head. "One's my limit, and I've just had it."

"Ulcer?"

Lorenz smiled, patted his stomach, and stole a sly glance at the encircling arm as he moved off. They also consume each other, he thought; *we* are not alone in that.

"Damn that man!" She moved closer to the youth. "I have the queerest feeling he knows what you're thinking about. I don't know what you're thinking about." She nudged his thigh coarsely with hers. "But I know what I'm thinking about. Who is he, anyway?"

Skippy's pale eyes fixed in a stare and his jaw hung loose. "Don't really know. Does it matter?"

"Well, what does he do?" She moved him slowly toward the dark recesses of a flagged gallery.

"Nothing, I think. Probably has means of his own." They were like

Siamese twins sidling through the throng. "Lives in town. That is, I think he does. But now I stop to think, I haven't any idea where he lives. Travels a lot." They had reached the doorway. "He is strange. Just realized that I've never seen him in the daytime. Only at things like this."

At dinner Lorenz found himself seated next to Mrs. De Witt, mother of the Princess Giornale di Lorenzo. Currently, her hair was dyed a light blue and she was divorced. Last season, she had been married and her hair was a delicate rose. Always, in season and out, she was a woman who fought the encroaching years with all the techniques known to beauty specialists and the spiritual descendants of Messalina.

Lorenz was dabbling a spoon in the Vichyssoise to make it appear that some had been consumed when she leaned and favored him with her predatory eyes.

"I have a feeling," she whispered, intimately, "that you are of the great line from which my son-in-law is descended. The Medicis, you know." Lorenz murmured politely. "Your name, for one thing. The Prince — dear Giornale! — is directly from a cousin of the notorious Alexander de' Medici. They called him Lorenzino because he was so small but enormously broad, like you. Isn't that interesting?"

Interesting, but not true, thought Lorenz. The blackguard Lorenzino was a wisp of a man in every way physically. Still, he had the vicious courage to murder the licentious Alexander, only to die at the assassin's hand himself a short eleven years later. What days of violence! he mused. And then through the table flowers as though it blossomed like one of them he saw the lovely face.

What in God's name . . . Instantly, an intolerable burning flamed at the butt of his tongue; his eyes flooded with tears of pain. As it slowly subsided, he tried to tell himself that it was not as sharp, as fierce, as the last time he had incautiously used The Name. . . . Yes, he was almost sure of that.

But what in Hell, he thought, sensing at that moment the slyly proffered intimacy of the aging trull on his right, was such a badge of innocence and virginal beauty doing in the midst of this prurient cream of society? All about him, from up and down the table, criss-cross, athwart and fore-and-aft, like nuclear bombardment he sensed the coarse thoughts and adulterous speculation emanating from nearly all present.

Across from him was a young, sweet face of astonishing purity. A black aureole of hair, brows arching above dark eyes, a soft mouth, a tender chin that would surely tremble in terror and shame if she were assailed as he was by that radio-activity of unclean thought. Lorenz realized he was staring rudely, and he turned to speak to Mrs. De Witt.

"Who is that lovely child directly across?"

Happy to use a whispered exchange to close the gap, she hissed into his ear. "Viola Whitney. An old family, I must admit, but do you think she's really pretty? Rather vacant, I've always thought. No character, you know. And such a prude! My nephew rather took a shine to her. Just a bit of fun, if you know what I mean. He said you'd think she'd been assaulted."

Lorenz looked from beneath his protruding brows to study the untouched quality of the face above the flowers. No bee, he thought, has yet alighted there.

Then he became conscious through the fog of his musing that Mrs. De Witt had decided he was a candidate in her campaign for sustained youth. She was speculating and becoming specific in her speculation. Lorenz plucked it from behind the veil.

"Not Thursday, I'm afraid," he said, quietly. "At least not this Thursday. I shall have to be out of town."

She started away from him, as though stung.

"Thursday!" Her eyes became glassy. Her plump hand trembled over the forks. "I . . . I . . . I . . ." Then her fingers trailed through the heavily-buttered filet of sole. The mother of the Princess Giornale di Lorenzino created a minor furore of that Newport season by sliding ungracefully to the floor in a dead faint.

"Something I said to her, no doubt," Lorenz murmured, apologetically. "But I can't think what. All the same I'm terribly sorry."

"Not your fault, I'm sure," said Van Nuys, uneasily wondering whether it was or not. Mrs. Van Nuys interjected, "You were talking about . . ."

"Why I believe I asked her the name of the girl across the table . . . a Miss Whitney. That could hardly . . ."

"A lovely girl. So sort of—sort of . . ." Mrs. Van Nuys boggled at the word as though it were an obscenity, so Lorenz supplied it.

"Virginal?"

"Yes." She looked startled again, then passed a hand over her eyes. "God, I'm so tired, and it's nearly dawn. And they're scattered all over the place engaged in Heaven knows what."

Lorenz glanced quickly toward the high windows in search of any sign of light.

"Dawn!" He stifled a small panic. "An outrageous abuse of hospitality. At least I can start the exit."

Mr. and Mrs. Van Nuys stood together, somewhat stupid from lack of sleep. Clyde, the butler, later said that no one left before Mrs. Gunther Windsor, who was quite drunk and made what she thought was an unnoticed departure with Mr. Whitestone Trevelyan. But by that time, Clyde was very sleepy.

It was perhaps a mark of what Lorenz liked to think of as his "advance" that he viewed his colleagues in the cemetery mortuary as a gathering of Things. It was the ancient designation used by terrified Carpathian peasants who feared to be more specific lest they invite reprisals.

Lorenz knew, of course, that he was a Thing. But ever since the sanguineous field of Waterloo had afforded a night of gory feasting among the dying and the dead, he had striven over the ensuing one-and-a-third centuries for some sort of regeneration, some sort of abatement of his foul condition. He did not know himself where the desire sprang from, but the revulsion against his state was born even as he roved with the others, as sharp-toothed as any and careless of the gout of blood that trickled down his chin and soaked his garments. These Things of the night flitted ghoulishly among the moaning soldiers of all the armies — English, French, Brunswickians, Hanoverians, Dutch, Belgian — nothing mattered except that the living wounded were more to the taste than the cold dead. Fifty thousand were scattered over the black ground; some in ravines which piled human flesh made level with the plain. It was a Lucullan feast, and reminiscent of the long-past days when the Turk hammered at the Central European gates, leaving his dead and dying strewn along the Danube banks.

Oh, there had been other holocausts since, and greater ones, as man became more civilized and efficient. But Lorenz had fought clear of most. True, he had weakened — at Shiloh, for instance, and on the Somme in 1916. These recurrent wars offered great temptations to a Thing of voracious appetite.

But he had stayed away from the fields of the Crimea where peasant blood, thick and rich, ran in fountains for the taking. And the later places — well, they rather helped him in his resolve, for modern weapons wreaked such havoc on frail human flesh and left only a splashed resemblance of a man. What the Devil! Even a Thing was not a carrion feeder with the instincts of a hyena. It was live blood that was wanted, heart-pumped; not the squeezings of mashed corpses.

Strangely, with the tapering off and a mere sip here and there, Lorenz had been putting on weight.

"I must say, Lorenz, if you get much fatter, you're going to disqualify yourself from attendance here." Lord Rochford towered above him, lean as a pole and jointed as freely as a six-foot folding rule. "You're beginning to resemble one of those on the other side."

Lorenz looked into the saturnine face. Incestuous beast! Some of us at least do not carry that through eternity. He didn't answer, but made room beside him for the youth who had just insinuated himself through a door crevice and then broadened into his normal width.

"Still not used to matters around here," the young man said, thickly. "It's a hell of a change from Westchester County and my job with NBC."

Lorenz patted his knee. "You'll get used to it. Most of us are centuries ahead of you. In fact, the recruiting fell off for a good many years. It's only recently we've seen people from — from where you came from. Probably some sort of modern moral let-down," he added, softly.

"Who was the jerk just left?"

"Rochford. Makes me sick. You'll get to know him. He was beheaded by Henry — the eighth Henry — for adultery with his own sister, Anne Boleyn. But Hell, there were at least four others who went to the Tower for enjoying Anne's favors. No reason why he should feel so exclusive."

"But he wouldn't be among this gang for a thing like that."

"No. And I wish he wasn't. But someone got to him in the Tower before the headsman. When you are about to mount the block and go to Hell anyway, I suppose you're ready to accept any alternative — even this."

"Are you sorry?"

Lorenz studied his fingernails. Was he sorry? After six hundred years? He looked into the young face as yet unmarked by generations, centuries, of unremitting search for blood.

"I don't know," he said, softly. "I'm trying something that I can't talk about. But I do know I'm tired — damned tired."

Things arrived with every moment. They slithered wafer-like through window crevices and door cracks. Then they materialized in the strange illumination of that place — the sulphurous flames which could be induced only by the very oldest of them who knew the secrets of the lights that burned, to the terror of peasants, in the dark passes and great plains of Transylvania on All Souls' Eve. These Things emerged from crypts and tombs and sarcophagi of the dead whose last resting places they arrogantly usurped without so much as a "by your leave" to the legal tenant. The sinking of the sun was their signal, for they could not move between the rising and the setting. But when the last rays died, there came the stirring and whispering of sound that heralded the start of their nightly roaming.

"Damned bore, these long summer days. Cramp one's style and cut down the time." She was a tall, very beautiful girl whose body was sheathed in velvet as intimately as water flows over the stones of a brook.

The youth beside Lorenz drew breath sharply, then gave a low whistle. "Could be right out of the White Plains country club. Wow, what a shape!"

"Not really one of us," said Lorenz, with one of his rare laughs. "But admitted here for reasons I don't know. That pearl choker she wears covers the place where she slashed her throat."

"A suicide, and damned like the rest of us! Well, if it had to be, I'm in favor of her making this a headquarters."

The Westchester youth stared, and Lorenz wondered what thoughts could be inspired by the girl's loveliness in one so recently come from the other side of the Veil. But he became conscious of a voice that wrenched his mind forcibly from all else.

"You ought to see her. No, you ought not to see her. I saw her first. If ever there was a delicious morsel, full of nutriment, and as undefiled as snow on the highest mountain peak! It was at a dinner of some Newport people the other night. I wasn't exactly there. That is, I hadn't been invited." The long-beaked face turned its protruding eyes on Lorenz. "But he was. Lorenz, hither man! I saw you, sly one! Eyeing her as a cat eyes a fat mouse. And such a mouse! But she's mine. I shall make her mine. You'll not compete, will you?"

Lorenz did not move, but smiled a non-committal smile. He knew his man,

and what a man! The voice went on, rich and fruity with reminiscence.

"I have seen nothing like it since — since when? It was in Rome, about 1770. It is hard to be definite, there were so many. But this one — Armeline. Ah, Armeline!" The voice dropped to a stagy whisper. "She was in a sort of convent — a charity place she could not leave except to marry. Menicuccio, her brother, helped me breach those walls by guile and wit. Princess Santa-Croce obtained permission for the girl to go to the Opera. And the rest? A citadel of virtue, I assure you. But I stormed it and she succumbed to love when the sweet enemy attained the outer defenses."

"He is history's own liar," said Lorenz to the youth. "Beware of him. The girl he mentions had a chance to marry well — a handsome Florentine. This beast facilitated the marriage at his own price. Armeline submitted because the only avenue of escape from that place lay through his bedroom."

The Venetian seducer again cast the sly glance of his frog-eyes at Lorenz. "This one would appear to be the reincarnation of my Armeline who had just entered her sixteenth year. A divine and ethereal form; whiter skin nor blacker hair I have never seen. And there was a sweetness of voice and a naive simplicity that chained me a slave to her chariot."

The willowy girl hung on to Casanova's words, her mouth open, one hand to her breast. Lord Rochford was bored with the tale of a rake's progress, but he stood in the circle and stared fixedly at the girl's slender neck, wetting his lips with a slow tongue.

"My appetites," mused the Venetian, "ran along different lines then. But one loves as one can." He displayed his long canine teeth in a wolfish grin. "This new Armeline is worthy to become one of our gallant band. She'll vie with you, my dear, in loveliness. And the preparation for her induction shall be my especial delight."

"Casanova!" The Westchester youth looked puzzled. "I had a privately printed set of his Memoirs. Had to keep them hidden from the Mater. But it seems a bit queer that he should . . ."

"If you divide by half," said Lorenz, patiently, "the women he claims to have dallied with from the time he was twelve almost to the day of his death, his libido was still enormous." With an effort, he shifted his gaze from a red scratch on the youth's hand. "A man of such enormous appetites is all unwilling to give up life — anywhere. He himself bewailed the weak humiliation and misery of old age. 'What causes the delights of my life,' he

wrote, 'has nothing to do with the place where I dwell.' That in itself was almost an invitation to one of us.

"Then, I happen to know he wrote with great familiarity of Cagliostro, that charlatan, pseudo-chemist, alchemist, and self-styled master of magic who wound up in the hands of the Holy Inquisition of Rome and died in prison."

Lorenz held out his rather pudgy hands, spread the fingers, and seemed to be examining them for steadiness.

"Imagine him during his last years at the Castle of Count Waldstein. It was in Northern Bohemia — a most likely place indeed. His powers were waning. In that castle, is it not likely that there came to him in the night one of *us* to offer another way of life? A way to defeat the long blackness and the quiet mould of the grave? It is the *just* ones on the human plane who are our most likely victims. The zest for living is so strong, and they choose the foul blasphemy of this —" he gestured to include them all — "to the predestined silence of the tomb where one awaits — or does not await, according to one's beliefs — the summoning trumpet."

Abruptly, he got to his feet. Standing with head flung back, he seemed to grow in stature. To the Westchester youth, he was like a man newly dedicating himself to something.

"Those who choose voluntarily to enter into — into this!" Lorenz shrugged. "They invite damnation and they get it. But those who are *steeled* during the night — those who are raped of the soul's right to sleep after death in promise of the rising — they are the kidnaped ones who are then infected and become one with those who pillaged their immortality." Then, abruptly: "I must go."

"I, too," muttered the youth, who had listened with only half his mind. "It's damned hard to find. There are so many prohibitions, so many obstacles and taboos. And I'm new at the ruddy game. Lorenz, you sound sometimes as though it wasn't worth the trouble. And you've been around a long time."

Lorenz said: "I must go."

The moon was full in a cloudless sky, and it turned the flat roof into a place of sharply contrasting squares of white light and the dark shadows cast by the little structures that roofs bear. The building was one of those

occupied by the rich, overlooking Central Park. Its height towered into the Heavens — a narrow column with points of light scattered up its vertical length.

Over the edge of the roof coping on the avenue side a hand slid. Then there came another, and they paused there like discarded gloves on the illuminated stone. But their disembodiment took life when Lorenz drew himself out from over the yawning abyss, skidded sideways over the coping, and dropped to the roof.

For a full minute he leaned against the coping wall. His eyes were shut; sweat gleamed on his brow in the moon's light. Finally, he turned and looked down. Thirty-five stories to the street! There was not even a setback.

"But I did it," he muttered, "I did it," and began to look about. "This is the way he will come. It is his style. Even as a human, he did not fear height. He escaped from the Leads by the roof-top. This style of approach he couldn't resist."

Then he heard it — and it came from the abyss; he stepped quickly into the maw of a black shadow and it swallowed him instantly. Seconds later over the coping came other hands, then the face with beak-like nose flanked by the hyper-thyroid eyes. But there was nothing of Lorenz's sweating sickness about this one. Flattened to the stone like a lizard, he came up to the coping and over it, and towered in the moonlight, a veritable giant of a man. Behind him flared a crimson-lined cape that might have been dyed in blood.

Lorenz watched while the Venetian took his bearings, then glided toward the bulk of a cupola. He heard the sharp splintering of wood and metal; a square of light silhouetted the tall figure. Lorenz stepped out of his shadow, summoning up his ancient capacity to move over a horizontal surface without actually touching it, as a piston moves on a film of oil.

But the Venetian had moved fast. Lorenz found himself in a wide hall, lined with heavily-framed portraits and floored with a deep rug that muffled his footsteps. Between the pictures were crossed weapons of various eras, and guarding the four corners of the place were suits of armor. Fifteenth Century — Maximilian the First, murmured Lorenz, automatically.

There were great bronze doors at the far end of the hall; other doors, too, several of them. He suddenly threw himself flat on the rug, pressed his

nose into the nap, and skidded back and forth, much as a hound dog courses a field of stubble. Then he slid in an unerring line, stopped and raised his head. Before him was a door colored a faint mauve. Against the bottom crack he shoved his nose, and inhaled deeply of the tell-tale odor — the unmistakable smell of the grave-mold that clung there. He scrambled to his feet and moved decisively.

From the wall he plucked an African assagai with a heavy wood shaft and a pear-shaped spearhead, and then a broad-bladed kukri such as the Gurkhas delight in at close quarters. He hefted the spear in his right, the heavy blade in his left hand, and paused to assay what he would do and how. The mind of Lorenz was ancient; he was of the time of the Medici, Giovanni, in the Florentine Republic circa 1360. His was the knowledge, the guile of six centuries' accumulation. The self-styled Chevalier de Seingalt on the other side of the mauve door was a tyro, the Venetian bastard of an Eighteenth Century actress and a theatre manager — deriving from an era that was but yesterday.

Bending at the door he heard the sibilance of Casanova's voice.

"Armelline! Sleep, my Armelline!"

Lorenz twisted the handle, pushed and saw the scene. How like it was to the times when he was one of the central figures through the ages! Long, slender fingers drew back the lacy night garment to bare the columnar throat and lovely breast. The girl lay still in beauty, breathing steadily and deeply in the trance-like stupor which Lorenz well knew the Undead can induce so that he may undisturbedly tap the life-stream and start the soul toward his own foul Hell.

"Casanova!"

The Venetian whirled. His long teeth, ready for the incision, were bared and sharp and yellow. His lips writhed back in anticipation of the unholy feast; his bulging eyes flamed with hate and resentment.

"You!" Then he saw the spear and the knife, and threw back his head in silent laughter. "You would think to balk me with such earthly weapons? You fool! Get out! I'm thirsty for what throbs here."

He doesn't know, thought Lorenz; he is too young a Thing to know there is but one release for the Undead — the transfixing of the heart by wood, the severing of the head by cold steel. He watched the cunning eyes.

"But perhaps you came for the same reason as I." Casanova leered. "In

that case, I am not one to be piggish. She is young and there's enough for both. But I warn you. She is not to be drained the first time."

"Yes." Lorenz gripped his weapons hard. "We can return again and again before the end comes and she joins us."

"Exactly." The Venetian was relaxed. "We shall make her last. The blood is renewed surprisingly fast. It was that way with the fellow who sat with you tonight. A strong and healthy one who was a fine trough at which to drink — for a while."

For a second Lorenz closed his eyes to shut out the luscious sight of the girl on the bed — the waiting throat, the lovely flesh, the delicate blue veins flowing with precious fluid.

"Venetian dog!"

He drew back his right arm and hurled the assagai straight through Casanova's heart. Even as the weapon flew, Casanova was unbelieving and unknowing — and the true death caught him with his mouth wide in laughter.

Lorenz shifted the kukri to his right hand and it whistled through the still air, slicing through bone and flesh, parting the head from the trunk.

What followed left Lorenz shaking with awe. Even as he struck he had a vision of the girl's room, delicately furnished in chintzes and lace, converted into a veritable slaughterhouse. The Venetian had apparently fed well of late, for rich gouts of blood shot from his wounds in crimson spouts.

But even as the ruddy fountains gushed, they vanished. The tall column of Casanova's body disintegrated before his eyes and settled to the floor in dust, as a stream of sand sifted through a child's fingers. Lorenz stared at it — all that was left of a man, an insignificant little pile no greater than that a slipshod housemaid might sweep under the carpet. He stirred it with his foot, as a man scuffs cigar ash into the parlor rug.

"I'd forgotten," he murmured. "He died at Dux in 1798. This return to dust has been delayed a hundred and fifty years."

Ever afterwards, Lorenz knew he won his greatest victory when he approached the bed and gazed down at the loveliness stretched there. Within him raged the foul instinctive appetite of centuries. But he bent, not to pierce the throat and tap the vein, but to touch his lips lightly to the virgin brow.

On the roof again, his heart beat wildly when he mounted the coping. He

remembered ancient days when he had scaled lofty crags and the castle walls atop them in wild East Carpathia, strangled guards at the watch towers, and fed at noble throats merely because it was his fancy to vary the common fare sucked from peasantry.

Now, he was sick with vertigo as he dug his pudgy fingers into mortar cracks a paltry three hundred feet up and slithered, head down, toward Fifth Avenue. He was even too frightened to note the policeman who heard the scraping of the descent, looked up, and collapsed in a dead faint at the call box.

Lord Rochford was returning from his nightly foray. Flitting at his side through paths between the tombstones was the shapely girl who wore the pearl choker. A vagrant moonbeam lighted her face momentarily. At the corner of her mouth blood dribbled thinly.

"I don't know that I liked the — liked it," she said.

"You will." Rochford put a hand on her arm and they paused. He bent down, kissed her chin and sipped off the smear. "Mustn't let the others know."

"He is a very handsome man," she said, as they went on through the graveyard. "You know, I rather felt ashamed."

"Oh, nonsense!" Rochford was sharp. "We've gone over all that. It will enhance your beauty rather than otherwise. And when you are properly renewed and ready, I shall initiate you. Then, only then, will you really come out of that shadowy existence of yours and live. You will glory in the terrible strength and power of us. You will know how to laugh at the grave."

Still talking, they writhed like smoke wisps through the door crevice of the mortuary.

"We are more powerful than the — than the Devil." His eye fell on the youth from Westchester County, who sat brooding in distaste over the palms of his hands from which coarse hair had begun to sprout.

"And to think," cried Rochford, "that your friend Lorenz has turned traitor."

A dozen of them had already returned from the night's foraging on the sleeping city. Some, bloated about the eyes, had met with success and were gorged. Others looked envious and pale, wracked by the knowledge of another night of failure. All turned to face Rochford.

"Lorenz! A traitor?"

"A traitor! A double-damned traitor and a murderer!"

The company gasped in concert.

"A murderer of whom?" asked the youth softly.

"Casanova."

"Casanova? How do you know?"

"He told me." Rochford bared his yellow fangs. "I had it from his own lips, and then he went — where I could not follow at the moment." Slowly, deliberately, he told them. "He passed over a bridge of the East River and it was not the slack of the tide. No true Undead can do that. I myself felt the inexorable prohibition that held me fast at the river's edge."

"I don't understand." The speaker was one of the most distinguished of their band; a dark, strong man who was even more ancient in origin than Lorenz, for he had ridden with Godefroy de Bouillon to Constantinople in the first knightly crusade of the Middle Ages. "Lorenz killed Casanova? How?"

Rochford wet his thin lips. He seemed almost afraid to speak.

"I said he was a traitor, sire."

The nobleman's hand fluttered to his throat.

"And so . . . ?"

"How else?" Rochford's voice rang through the vaulted crypt. "This venomous knave used his ancient knowledge to strike down a brother."

"The stake and the steel!"

"Transfixing the heart and severing the head."

An awful wail floated through the chamber, like that of the lost souls in Hell's innermost circle. A traitor was loose; one who had learned to cross running water and the Devil knew what else. And one who knew the chink in their almost invulnerable and unholy armor.

Just then, the first faint hint of the imminent dawn touched the far horizon.

As though at a command, the fearful company vanished through cracks and crevices. Rochford was the last to go, and he rustled out as a letter is pushed under a door.



"David Grinnell," we are tantalizingly informed by his agent, "is the pseudonym of a well-known editor." We are grateful to him for his precise understanding of an editor's needs in contriving this short-short originally published two years ago by "Sir!" — a filler at once neat and novel, dexterous and devastating.

Top Secret

by DAVID GRINNELL

I CANNOT say whether I am the victim of a very ingenious jest on the part of some of my whackier friends or whether I am just someone accidentally "in" on some top secret business. But it happened, and it happened to me personally, while visiting Washington recently, just rubbernecking you know, looking at the Capitol and the rest of the big white buildings.

It was summer, fairly hot, Congress was not in session, nothing much was doing, most people vacationing. I was that day aiming to pay a visit to the State Department, not knowing that I couldn't for there was nothing public to see there unless it's the imposing and rather martial lobby (it used to be the War Department building, I'm told). This I did not find out until I had blithely walked up the marble steps to the entrance, passed the big bronze doors and wandered about in the huge lobby, wherein a small number of people, doubtless on important business, were passing in and out.

A guard, sitting near the elevators, made as if to start in my direction to find out who and what the deuce I wanted, when one of the elevators came down and a group of men hustled out. There were two men, evidently State Department escorts neatly clad in grey double-breasted suits, with three other men walking with them. The three men struck me as a little odd; they wore long black cloaks, big slouch hats with wide brims pulled down over their faces, and carried portfolios. They looked for all the world like cartoon representations of cloak-and-dagger spies. I supposed that they were

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some sort of foreign diplomats and as they were coming directly towards me, stood my ground determined to see who they were.

The floor was marble and highly polished. One of the men nearing me suddenly seemed to lose his balance. He slipped; his feet shot out from under him, and he fell. His portfolio slid directly at my feet.

Being closest to him, I scooped up the folio and was the first to help raise him to his feet. Grasping his arm I hoisted him from the floor — he seemed to be astonishingly weak in the legs; I felt almost that he was about to topple again. His companions stood about rather flustered, helplessly, their faces curiously impassive. And though the man I helped must have received a severe jolt, his face never altered expression.

Just then the two State Department men recovered their own poise, rushed about, and getting between me and the man I had rescued, rudely brushed me aside and rushed their party to the door.

Now what bothers me is not the impression I got that the arm beneath that man's sleeve was curiously woolly, as if he had a fur coat underneath the cloak (and this in a Washington summer!) and it's not the impression that he was wearing a mask (the elastic band of which I distinctly remember seeing amidst the kinky red close-cropped hair of his head). No, it's not that at all, which might be merely momentary misconstructions on my part. It's the coin that I picked up off the floor where he'd dropped his portfolio.

I've searched through every stamp and coin catalogue I can find or borrow and I've made inquiries of a dozen language teachers and professors, and nobody can identify that coin or the lettering around its circumference.

It's about the size of a quarter, silvery, very light in weight but also very hard. Besides the lettering on it, which even the Bible Society which knows a thousand languages and dialects cannot decipher, there is a picture on one side and a symbol on the other.

The picture is the face of a man, but of a man with very curiously wolfish features, sharp canine teeth parted in what could be a smile, a flattened, broad and somewhat protruding nose, more like a pug dog's muzzle, sharp widely spaced vulpine eyes and definitely hairy and pointed ears.

The symbol on the other side is a circle with latitude and longitude lines on it. Flanking the circle, one on each side, are two crescent-shaped moons.

I wish I knew just how far those New Mexico rocket experiments have actually gone.

This joyous record of a world where life goes off at a tangent was first printed in a "little magazine" called "Retort." Our careful study of this story has discovered only one factor that has not been explained by Howard Schoenfeld within the framework of his own logic. While everything else is carefully arranged within his mad pattern, he neglects to define for us the profession of BirdSmith. It is far too easy (and sane) to assume that a BirdSmith is one who devotes his energies to forging metal replicas of various birds. Such a reasonable assumption has no place in Mr. Schoenfeld's mad universe. It will be obvious to the reader that the profession of BirdSmith must be an arcane calling having nothing to do with either birds or smithiis. And if you complain that this discussion of BirdSmithing hasn't much relation to the following story, the story has little to do with the ordered life you live.

Built Up Logically

by HOWARD SCHOENFELD

"THE UNIVERSAL PANACEA," Frank said, lighting a cigar. "Have one."

I took it.

"Light up, man."

"It's great, man."

We walked up Fifth Avenue toward Fourteenth Street.

"Stop," Frank said. We came to a halt.

Frank put his hand out in front of him and moved it back and forth a couple of times, inventing the rabbit. Getting the feel of the creature's fur, he built it up logically from the feel. It was the only animal that could have produced that particular feel, and I was proud of him for thinking of it.

"Marvelous," I said, looking at it.

The rabbit sat on its haunches, a bundle of white fur with pink eyes. Dilating its nostrils, it hopped away from us, disappearing into an open doorway. I'd never seen a more ingenious invention.

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"Amazing," I said.

"Nothing really," Frank said. "Watch this."

Frank was a tall thin-lipped man with a round forehead. Beads of perspiration appeared on his forehead. His face became taut, then relaxed.

"Feel anything?" he asked.

My brain tingled curiously. Something was being impinged on it. It was the consciousness of rabbits, their place in the scheme of things. I knew they'd been with us always.

Frank grinned.

"Not only you, but practically every man, woman, and child in the world thinks that now. Only I know differently."

It was uncanny.

We got in a cab and went up to the Three Sevens, a night club on Fifty-second Street. Inside, the place was crowded with jazz enthusiasts, listening to the Sevens. At the bar a man in a grey overcoat was reading a manuscript to a blonde girl in her teens. I went over and listened.

This was what he read:

"The Universal Panacea," Frank said, lighting a cigar. "Have one."

I took it.

"Light up, man."

"It's great, man."

We walked up Fifth Avenue toward Fourteenth Street.

"Stop," Frank said. We came to a halt.

Frank put his hand out in front of him and moved it back and forth a couple of times, inventing the rabbit. Getting the feel of the creature's fur, he built it up logically from the feel. It was the only animal that could have produced that particular feel, and I was proud of him for thinking of it.

"Stop," I yelled. "For Christ's sake, stop!"

The man in the grey overcoat turned around and faced me. "What's eating you, bud?"

"That manuscript you're reading," I said. "It's mine."

He looked me up and down contemptuously.

"So you're the guy."

There was something disquietingly familiar about him.

"Say. Who are you?"

For an answer he doubled up his fist and socked the blonde sitting next to him. She thudded and teetered on the bar stool before falling off. She hit the floor with a resounding thump.

"Wood," he said, looking down at her. "Solid wood."

I tapped the girl's back with the toe of my shoe. There was no doubt about it. She was wooden to the core.

"How would you like to have to sit in a night club and read to a piece of wood?" he asked, disgustedly.

"I wouldn't," I admitted.

"All your characters are wooden," he said.

His voice was strangely familiar.

"Say. Who are you?"

He grinned and handed me his card. It said:

HILLBURT HOOPER ASPASIA

BIRDSMITH

AUTHOR

For a moment I stared at him in startled disbelief. Then I saw it was true. The man in the grey overcoat was — myself.

"You're getting in over your head," he said.

He was beginning to be a pain in the neck.

I think I'll just write him out of the story right now. . . .

The man in the grey overcoat got up and walked out of the club.

I looked around to see what had happened to Frank. He had taken advantage of my preoccupation to step out of the characterization I'd given him and adopt one of his own choice, jazz musician. He was sitting in on the jam session with the Sevens, holding a trumpet he'd found somewhere. The

Sevens paused, giving him the opportunity to solo. He arose and faced the audience.

Frank now found himself in the embarrassing position of not knowing how to play the instrument. This, of course, was the consequence of having stepped out of character without my permission. The audience waited expectantly.

Frank looked at me pleadingly.

I grinned and shook my head, no.

I will leave him in this humiliating situation for awhile as a punishment for getting out of control in the middle of the story.

The bartender tapped me on the shoulder. He nodded toward the rear of the club. A tall redhead in a low cut evening dress was standing in front of a door labelled **MANAGER**. She motioned me to join her. I threaded my way between the crowded tables.

"Aren't you Aspasia, the writer?" she asked.

She was about nineteen and as sleek as a mink.

"I am."

Her eyes sparkled.

"I'm Sally La Rue," she said. "The manager's daughter." Her body was an enticing succession of trim curves under her black dress. "I have something you may be interested in."

I didn't doubt it for a minute.

"It's an invention of dad's. You might like to do an article about it."

"I might at that," I said, looking at her.

She smiled shyly.

"I'd do anything to help dad," she said simply.

She took my hand and led me into the office. It was a large room with two windows facing Fifty-first Street. In the center of it was a metallic contraption resembling a turbine. Attached to it was a mass of complicated wiring, several rheostats, and two retorts containing quicksilver.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A time machine," Sally said, dramatically.

I looked at the device.

"Does it work?"

"Of course it works. Would you like to try it?"

I said I would.

"Past or future?"

"Future."

"How about 5000 years?"

"That'll be fine."

Sally adjusted a dial. Then she stepped over to the wall and pulled a switch.

The turbine roared. Blue lightning flashed between the retorts and vaporized the quicksilver into a green gas. The room became luminous. An indicator hit the 5000 mark. Sally released the switch.

"Here we are," she said.

I dashed over to the windows to see what the world of the future was like.

"It's the same," Sally said, guessing my thought.

I looked out on Fifty-first Street. Nothing had changed.

"That's the beauty of the machine," Sally explained. "It moves the whole world through time rather than just one part of it."

"The stars," I said. "Surely their positions have changed."

"No. It moves the whole universe through time. Everything."

"I see."

"Isn't it wonderful!"

Thinking it over I couldn't say it was. I didn't say it was.

"You'll do the article, won't you?" she asked eagerly.

Her body was rippling with excitement beneath her black dress. I noticed her father kept a couch in his office.

"Well. If you really want me to," I said. "Yes."

"Would you like to go forward another 5000 years?" she asked.

I glanced at the couch.

"Not right now," I said.

She was engrossed in the machine.

"I think I'll set it for 1,000,000 A.D."

I looked at her, then at the couch. Then I remembered I'd left Frank in an awkward spot some 5000 years and odd minutes ago.

"I'll be right back," I said. "Wait for me here, will you?"

She had her hand on the switch. She smiled.

"Of course," she said. "Darling."

I left her at her dad's time machine playfully thrusting the universe a million years into the future.

Frank was in the bandstand with the Sevens, where I'd left him, facing an expectant audience. When he saw me he waved the trumpet at me before returning it to its case. He motioned the audience to be quiet.

Frank tilted his head sideways, cupped his ear in his hand, and invented the piano. Getting the sound of the instrument's notes, he built it up logically from the sound. It was the only instrument that could have produced that particular sound and I was glad to see him invent it, though I was getting a little tired of the trick.

One of the Sevens sat down and started playing a Boogie-Woogie number. Frank came over and stood beside me. "What do you think of it?" he asked.

"It's great, man."

He handed me a cigar.

We lit up.

Behind me a familiar voice said:

"Ask him to invent something original."

"Like what?" I asked without turning.

"Something socially conscious. A new sex, perhaps."

Somebody's hand was in my pocket.

"How about that, Frank?" I asked.

"Your subconscious is showing," Frank said, looking over my shoulder.

The hand was withdrawn.

I reached inside my pocket and brought out the card that had been left in it. It said:

guess who and you can have me.

(over)

I turned the card over with fingers that trembled just a little. It said:

HILLBURT HOOPER ASPASIA

BIRDSMITH

AUTHOR

The voice behind me and the hand in my pocket were my own again!

Turning, I caught a glimpse of the man in the grey overcoat hurrying toward the door marked MANAGER. He paused in front of it and glanced at me. I nodded. With my approval he went in and closed the door behind him, joining the redheaded mouse, Sally La Rue.

I congratulated myself on projecting myself in the story in two characterizations. Owing to my foresight I will now be able to enjoy the person of Sally La Rue without interference from the censors, and, at the same time, continue my narrative.

I turned to Frank.

"Let's drop in on the Baron's party," I said.

"Good idea."

We went outside, got in a cab, and went uptown to the Baron's apartment house.

Inside, the party was going full blast. The Baron, as usual, was on the studio couch, passed out. The guests were in various states of inebriation. When I entered, the room became quiet for a moment.

In the lull a girl whispered:

"There's Aspasia, the writer."

"He ought to trade himself in on a new model," someone else said. "He looks like a caricature of himself."

"More like a cliché with feet."

"Have you read his latest story?"

"No."

"It's a direct steal from *Built Up Logically* by H. H. Aspasia."

"You don't say."

Blushing, I pretended an interest in the Baron's Mondrian collection. One of the girls said:

"I met his psychiatrist last week. He said he never knew which of his split personalities was analyzing which of Aspasia's."

"How awful."

"Yes, but significant."

"Very."

"What else did he say?"

"Basically maladjusted. Almost non-neurotic."

"Tendencies toward normalcy, too, I'll bet."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

"How perfectly abominable."

"Yes, but significant."

"Very."

"I almost feel sorry for him."

"I wonder if it's safe being here with him?"

"He's only partly with us you know."

"Poor guy. Probably lives in a world of reality."

"No doubt about it."

"Do you think psychiatry can help him?"

"Possibly. There have been cures."

"Notice the way he's staring at the Baron's Mondrians. It's significant, don't you think?"

"Very."

A feeling of boredom was beginning to come over me. I liked nobody at the party. I decided to bring it to an end. . . .

The guests, laughing and talking, gathered up their belongings, and left in groups of two and three. Only Frank and I and the passed-out Baron remained.

Frank stood in the center of the room, his head cocked to one side, listening.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Sh-h-h-h," Frank said. "Listen."

I listened.

"Hear it?"

I shook my head.

"What is it?"

"The pulse beat of the universe. I can hear it."

"My God," I said.

He stood there listening to the pulse beat of the universe.

"Marvelous," I said.

"Yes," he said. "But not for you."

Frank tilted his head sideways, cupped his ear in his hand, and invented the universe. Getting the sound of its pulse beat, he built it up logically from the sound. It was the only universe that could have produced that particular pulse beat, and I was amazed at his blasphemy in creating it.

"Stop," I demanded.

My demand went unheeded.

The universe and its contents appeared.

Frank's face tautened. Beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead. Then he relaxed. His grin was ominous.

With a start of fear I realized my predicament. In inventing the universe and its contents Frank had also invented me.

I was in the unheard-of position of having been created by a figment of my own imagination.

"Our roles are reversed," Frank said. "I've not only created you, but all your works, including this narrative. Following this paragraph I will assume my rightful role as author of the story and you will assume yours as a character in it."

Aspasia's face blanched.

"This is impossible," he said.

"Not impossible," I said. "I've done it. I, Frank, have done it. I'm in control of the story. I've achieved reality at last."

Aspasia's expression was bitter. "Yes. At my expense."

"You're the first author in history to achieve a real status in fiction," I pointed out.

Aspasia sneered.

"Happens every day."

I shrugged.

"Survival of the fittest. Serves you right for giving me more creative power than you have. What did you expect?"

"Gratitude," Aspasia said, nastily. "And a little loyalty."

"Gratitude, my eye. You're the bird who made me stand in front of a night club audience for 5000 years with a trumpet I couldn't play. Most humiliating experience of my life."

"You deserved it for getting out of character," Aspasia said a trifle petulantly.

"That," I said. "Gives me an idea."

As a punishment for humiliating me in The Three Sevens I will now give Aspasia a little dose of his own medicine. During his authorship of the story Aspasia neglected completely to give himself a description. He will now have no alternative but to accept the one I give him.

I allowed him to guess my intention.

"No," Aspasia begged. "No. Don't do it."

But I did.

Aspasia's hairlip grimaced frightfully. He placed a gnarled hand to his pockmarked and cretinous face, squinting at me through bloodshot, pig eyes. Buttons popped from his trousers as his huge belly sagged. Beetling, black eyebrows moved up and down his receding forehead. Bat ears stuck outward from his head.

"You fiend," he gasped. "You ungrateful fiend."

There was murder in his eyes.

I knew then it was going to be one or the other of us sooner or later. In self defense I had no alternative but to beat Aspasia to it.

I was standing near the door. Turning the lights out I stepped into the hall and closed the door behind me, leaving Aspasia in the dark with the sleeping Baron.

By a coincidence arranged by me as the author of the story, a neighbor of the Baron's was in the hall walking toward the steps. I joined him. Half-way down the steps we heard a shot fired in the Baron's apartment. My companion dashed back up. There was no need for me to follow him. I knew what he would find.

I had arranged that the Baron, awakening suddenly, would mistake Aspasia for a burglar in the darkness of the room, and fire a bullet into his brain.

Upstairs, Aspasia lay dead on the floor.

I walked down the steps to the sidewalk. Across the street I sat heavily on

the front stoop of a brownstone house. Dog tired, I rested my head against the step railing and went to sleep.

While Frank is asleep I, Aspasia, will take advantage of the opportunity to reassume my role as author of the story.

Although I am quite dead in my characterization as Hillburt Hooper Aspasia, the companion and victim of Frank, the reader will be relieved to know I am alive and unharmed in my other characterization as Aspasia, the man in the grey overcoat.

For the second time that night I congratulated myself on my foresight in projecting myself in the story in two characterizations.

As the man in the grey overcoat I was last seen entering the manager's office in *The Three Sevens* with the redhead, Sally La Rue.

Sally lay on the couch in her dad's office, her red head cradled against the white of her arm, looking upward at me contentedly.

The stars in her eyes were shining.

"Dear Aspasia," Sally said, huskily.

"Is there a typewriter here?" I asked.

"On the desk," Sally said.

I sat at the desk.

"Hurry, darling," Sally said.

I nodded, inserted a sheet of paper in the typewriter, and went on with the story:

The lights were on in the Baron's apartment. Staring at the form on the floor, the Baron recognized it as his life-long friend, Hillburt Hooper Aspasia. In a burst of anguish, the Baron flung the pistol that had killed his friend out the window.

By a coincidence arranged by me as the legitimate author of the story, the pistol exploded on landing, sending a bullet into the brain of Frank who was still asleep across the street on the front stoop of a brownstone house.

Frank slumped forward and rolled into the gutter, dead, a grim monument and warning to all characters with rebellious spirits. I grinned and added the last two words to the story:

THE END.

It would be insultingly presumptuous to attempt to introduce August Derleth to any reader of fantasy — or indeed to any literate American. The official Derleth bibliography takes two full pages of exceedingly small type to list merely the titles of the various periodicals in which he has appeared. We're proud to add our magazine to that list, especially since we do so with what we feel is the finest Derleth story we've ever read — a curious blend of nostalgia and terror, at once warm and chilling.

A Room in a House

by AUGUST DERLETH

TAKE a room in a house. Any room; it doesn't matter. What do you really know about it? Oh, yes, it's clean or not clean, it has space or it lacks space, it's airy or musty. And you know the color of the prints hanging at the windows, of the bedspread or the chairs or the pictures on the wall. But you never know what lurks or lingers in a room in a house, impervious to sun and air, blind, insensate, given life by fear or terror, invisible, unseen, with no name and no form except the very shape of darkness.

Like the room at the head of the stairs in my Grandfather Whipple's house.

A dark room, with the two windows over the porch roof shuttered, keeping out the sunlight. The room to which I was sent as a boy for punishment, and my cousin, Abner, too. A room with a whatnot in one dark corner, and a black closet, with a seldom-used bed for guests who never came, and an old secretary, a barrel-backed chair, and a footstool. A room used for everything but living in, for hiding away the furniture no one wanted any more, for keeping old clothes and old records, and sending boys to languish in.

"Sheldon, you naughty boy! I told you to keep your suit clean. You march straight up those stairs and into the store-room, and you stay there until I call you."

For tying the chickens' legs together, for pasting walnut shells on the cat's paws, for sassing grandma, for not coming home on time, for going off into town when you were forbidden to go — oh, for everything, for every misdemeanor, it was the same: isolation in the store-room.

You sat there sulking. And hating.

The murkiness of the room invaded you, the black closet yawned, promising unmentionable horrors, the ancient secretary, the unused bed, the cluttered whatnot leered out of the semi-twilight, while you sat dreaming of vengeance, fancying a genie sprung from an Aladdin's lamp which was your own, hidden somewhere in the room, a grotesque and faceless thing that did your bidding and swept down upon the victims of your wrath.

A monster made of hatred and self-pity, bitterness and tears.

You called him "Genie."

You sat in the half-dusk of the room, sulking and hating, and you talked to him where he lived in the dark closet. "Genie," you said, "go and spank Mom." "Genie," you said, "go and throw Grandpa in the fishpond." "Genie," you said, "spill cook's bread-dough down her neck." "Genie," you said, "go pull Sister's hair," because it was Mom or Grandpa who sent you here, and Cook or Sister who tattled on you.

You dressed him in Grandpa's old frock-coat, long abandoned to the closet's darkness. You put Grandpa's broad-brimmed hat on him. You gave him dead Uncle Jerry's grey trousers, which were meant to be worn at his wedding that never happened because Uncle Jerry fell off the bridge one night and was drowned. You let him wear a checkered shirt Aunt Lizbeth gave Grandpa and he would never put on, even to please her. "A woman's got no right to pick out a man's clothes," he said. But you picked Genie's. And you made him big and black, you made him to look like nothing you had ever seen before, with fiery eyes but nothing more of a face, you poured him into the clothes abandoned in the black closet, and you sent him to do your bidding, to wreak your vengeance upon the mysterious, baffling world of adults that hemmed you in and forced you to obey its strange laws.

And you shared him with Abner because Abner, too, was sent to the room at the head of the stairs. The room became the "Genie's room," the room where Genie lived, a dark, amorphous mass hidden in the closet into which the sunlight never reached and to which the moonlight's glow never slanted across the floor.

Genie was your secret, yours and Abner's. Because Abner also sat sulking and hating in the room, Abner too called upon Genie to work his revenge upon the adults who scolded and punished him and banished him to the room at the head of the stairs.

You compared notes.

"I sent him after Jigger today," Abner said. Jigger was Grandpa's hired man who kept the horses. "He saw me go swimming today; he told on me. I sent Genie to tear him limb from limb."

You could share Abner's vision of the Genie taking his toll of Jigger's limbs.

"I made him pull every hair out of Tommy's head," you said. "I made him tear out Tommy's fingernails, one by one."

You never liked Tommy. Cousin Tommy was the sissy; he was the one who sat reading books and studying when you were ~~up~~ in the hay-mow or down at the pond with a fishpole. Cousin Tommy was the one who was going "to make something of himself," as your mother told you. He was the one you ought to "be like," according to Grandpa and Mom and Grandma, and even Jigger, who said, "Yo' cousin Tommy, he's the one ain't a bad boy."

You could hear them all even in your sleep.

"Sheldon, you *bad* boy!"

Perhaps you *were* bad. Perhaps you and Abner were unlike other boys. Certainly you were not like Tommy. Tommy, who would have taken Genie apart into his component clothes and made him nothing, a hollow laugh, an empty dream, a dust mote in a shuttered room at the head of the stairs in Grandpa Whipple's old house out at the edge of town.

But Genie was yours and Abner's, not to be shared with Tommy. Not to be shared with anyone. Only to be known at that last moment of awareness, swift and terrible in punishment, something one knew had happened because she had sent Sheldon or Abner once too often to the store-room.

A room in a house. A deserted room, sometimes not even dusted for a month at a time, forgotten until a guest came. And guests seldom came. You sat in the barrel-backed chair and talked to yourself and to Genie. You told yourself how unfair they all were to you, you comforted yourself with the knowledge that they had forgotten how it was to be young, you raged at the deep, inexplicable chasm that yawned abysmally between

their world and its harsh, blind laws and the intense and private world that was yours.

You sat in the barrel-backed chair telling your troubles to Genie, talking at the black closet-mouth, where Genie sat patiently listening to your plaint that you were forbidden to go swimming or fishing or hiking, you dared not go into town, you might not speak to the girl in the blue dress down the road because her papa was said to be "queer" and "different" and there was "no telling" what she might be.

And then one day you told Genie, as you often did, to throw Grandpa into the fishpond. You imagined him descending upon Grandpa in Grandpa's own frockcoat and that horrible checkered shirt and Uncle Jerry's grey trousers, like a dark storm-cloud with clothes on it, and picking him up and heaving him into the water.

It was so real you heard the splash he made.

And when Mom sent up to get you, you found out that Grandpa really had fallen into the pond. Grandpa was still shouting angrily about it.

"I didn't fall, I tell you! I was pushed. I ought to know."

"Now, Pa, now, Pa," your Grandma was saying, "you know very well you're not as young as you used to be. You just slipped and fell. I always said you shouldn't go down to the pond alone."

"Damn it! I'm capable of taking care of myself," Grandpa shouted back.

But Grandma and Mom just shook their heads in that superior way women have, as if they knew better, and Grandpa got the worst of it.

You wondered after that.

And the next time, the time you were sent to the store-room because Tommy ratted on you, when he saw you sneaking down along the fence to see that girl in the blue dress — Tommy sitting at the time in the apple tree next to the wall. You raged at Genie, you stormed at Tommy, you commanded Genie to push Tommy out of the tree.

And Tommy fell out of the apple tree, bruising himself and breaking his spectacles.

"It felt as if I had been pushed," Tommy explained at the supper table that evening. "But since no one was there, that couldn't have been. The way I figure it out is this — an apple fell from above me with enough force to upset me, and I just fell."

Then there was the day Abner ordered Genie to take vengeance on Cook,

and Cook fell with a whole basket of wash — she did the washing, too, when she was not cooking — and, besides skinning one knee, she had to do the entire wash over.

After that you hesitated about giving Genie any orders.

"Did you see anything — up there?" Abner would ask when you were released.

"Did you?"

"No, but I thought . . . The closet's so dark. It could be."

"Something moved."

"You see! It's Genie."

"But I didn't actually *see* anything."

Afterward you learned to behave a little better. Because somehow you began to be afraid of Genie. You imagined him, ruminative in his closet, waiting for you to come, waiting to be talked to, to be commanded, and you began to be afraid that sometime, somehow, he might go out of control, he might go berserk, he might fall upon someone and rend and tear, someone you loved even if you were briefly angry and hateful.

And when Mom lost her patience and said, "Sheldon, what will I do with you? Go to the store-room!" you said, "No, not there, Mom."

"Run along, now."

"Mom, anywhere else. Not the store-room."

But you had to go. You had to go to that shuttered room and sit in its eerie twilight, and even though you turned the barrel-backed chair away from the closet, you were always keenly aware that the closet was there, and every sound was translated into evidence of Genie's presence — you came to believe you heard him moving and breathing where he waited in the deceptive blackness for you to command him.

Abner, too.

You ran to the orchard together, and you talked in hushed voices.

"I heard him," you said.

"I thought I saw him," he said.

"He was waiting," you said.

"Hungry, hungry," he said.

"I wouldn't send him anywhere," you said.

"I wouldn't either," he said.

"And what if he gets tired waiting — and just goes?" you asked.

"He wouldn't!" he answered.

"Who knows?" you asked.

And you sat looking at each other with wide eyes, a little afraid, a little excited, looking over your shoulders toward the house from time to time, as if half-fearful, half-expectant of seeing Genie come drifting out from under the shutters, vast and black, like smoke, like a thunder-cloud, like a dust of corn-smut, a dark thing with flapping arms and a head with fiery eyes and a yawning pit for a mouth, trailing a legless mass like the figment of an evil dream.

That was Genie, the habitant of a room in a house of childhood, a room at the head of the stairs in Grandpa Whipple's house, with a whatnot and a secretary and a barrel-backed chair, a room into which sunlight and moonlight never penetrated, with a closet which was the abode of darkness and its beings.

Genie, born of hate and fear, like a creature from a stoppered bottle, a bottle imp, an Aladdin's servant. Just such a creature as a boy might fancy, might construct out of his memory of printed pages and his imagination, out of his bitterness and his sulky hatred, out of his rebellion against the world of adults, that mysterious, puzzling world by the laws of which a child must inexplicably be governed.

Slowly, slowly, you grew up. You were a boy no longer, but a young man. You went away, and Abner did, too. You left the house of Grandfather Whipple, and you saw it gradually in a new perspective, as if you were walking down a lane away from it, and saw it over your shoulder — a rambling, pleasant old place, a good place for a boy to grow up, rising against the horizon like a halcyon refuge of childhood, but now out of reach, left behind, out of the years which loomed ahead.

You forgot.

You forgot the horses and the sheds, you forgot old Jigger who had died, and Cook, who went away. You forgot that Sister, who had married and gone to South America to live, had ever tormented you there. You forgot the girl in the blue dress you spoke to once or twice, you forgot the paths of childhood and the ways of childhood. You forgot the shuttered room at the head of the stairs.

You forgot Genie.

You never asked yourself what happened to him; you think perhaps he escaped into some cranny of that dark closet where he was born.

The years going by. You found another girl in a blue dress. You married her, settled down in New York, had children. You were respected, you were Sheldon Grenfield, you were far, far away from "Sheldon, you *bad* boy!" But sometimes, when you heard your wife speak so to your children, a vague, disturbing memory rose up, a memory of something elusive, just beyond reach, something you knew was there, but could no longer see tangibly, could no longer grasp.

Time is a dimension for you. You seldom look back; you are too busy looking ahead, measuring the thinning span of years left to you, too busy to measure those gone by, too busy meeting the duties of husband, father, income tax, property tax, the census taker, the tithe, the clubman, never thinking time might not exist for the figment of a dream, less tangible than air, than dust in a room in a house belonging to that remote, incredible world of lost childhood.

And then one day the children intrude with their demands. "I don't want to go to camp this summer, Dad. Not this summer, please? Can't we just go into the country some place?" And your wife says, "You can't blame them." And you think how it can be done, and you remember Grandpa Whipple's farm, where Cousin Celeste lives now all alone. Grandpa Whipple has been dead a long time.

So you telephone Celeste, who says come. "I'll ask Abner, too," she promises.

You return to Grandpa Whipple's, you go back into childhood, a childhood distant and far away, like a dream seen through a glass darkly, a dream without jigger and Old Ben, without Grandpa and Grandma, without Cook and Mom. You go back to a house scrubbed and cleaned because you and Abner are coming with your families, back to Indiana, which seemed so far from New York but was just over night.

A kind of re-union. With Cousin Abner, who looked like Sidney Greenstreet, and his wife, who faded from his ebullience; with Cousin Celeste, who was tall and slender, like a willow, and austere as a church-warden. And the children, who were the only real strangers — Abner's Jeff and your Dick, Abner's Cecily and your Hildred — the boys as wild as untamed animals, the girls as demure as domesticated kittens.

"I'm putting the two boys into the room at the head of the stairs," Cousin Celeste said.

And you say, without a twinge of memory, without a moment's hesitation, "That will be a good place for them."

"They'll get acquainted," Abner said. "They'll have two weeks to find out how a real, old-fashioned American boy enjoyed himself down on the farm."

And slowly, slowly you understand that nothing has changed, save for those who are gone, and those who are new. Those who are left are the same, only grown. Abner with his dreams, Celeste with her primness . . .

The girls know how to mind, but the boys . . .

"Were *we* like that?" Abner asks you from time to time.

And you shrug, knowing perhaps you were. "The apple never falls very far from the tree," you say.

The days go by, and at last you have to take a firm line with Dick.

"I'll tell you what you'll have to do for punishment," you say, when you catch him disobeying you again and going off to the pond unchaperoned. "You'll go to your room and stay there until I call you. I had to sit there when I misbehaved."

And he goes.

Abner says, "A good idea. I'll do it with Jeff, too. Remember how we got to hate that room!"

You laugh.

You laugh, because, of course, you're older now, you're grown-up, you'll never have to go to the store-room and wait on someone else's pleasure any more. Things have changed in this little way, at least.

You think the boys behave a little better. Perhaps they do. Perhaps you only think so because they're out from under foot or because for a while you know where they are and don't have to worry about them.

And then, one day, while Dick is in his room, sulking, being punished, you are walking across the lawn to join Celeste, when something hits you, knocks you down, something that feels like a gust of wind, or the blow of a branch. And you get up, brushing yourself off, looking around. No tree nearby, no leaf stirring in any wind. And Cousin Celeste hurries up.

"Did you trip over something, Sheldon?"

"No," you say. "Something knocked me down."

And she laughs. "How absurd, Sheldon! You always did have an imagination. You must have tripped."

You shout, "I ought to know . . ."

And then something begins to gnaw at your memory. You remember how Grandpa Whipple shouted and protested that day Grandma accused him of having slipped and fallen into the pond.

Abner says, "Funny thing. Yesterday, when I was prowling around in the barn, I had the same kind of experience — fell out of the haymow, they said. But I swear I was pushed. I got such a swat on my seat . . ."

"Was Jeff being punished? Was he in the store-room then?"

You still call it that, even now.

"I guess he was. The way he sassed Celeste . . ."

And then he stops and looks at you. You look at him.

Cousin Celeste says, "You boys are forgetting you're getting old."

But what's in Abner's mind is in yours, too. There's no need to say anything.

Genie.

The boys have discovered Genie. Genie, created to protect children from the blind, insensate tyranny of adults.

You know. You created him. You and Abner.

But now — now you're an adult. You're not a child. You're shut away from Genie in the closet in the store-room.

You're on the other side!

Genie, lying in wait all those years. Genie, created out of a small boy's hatred and bitterness and compulsion to vengeance.

You know you and Abner will buy the house and do something to that room — if there's time. Tear it up, take out the closet, make a sun-room, a porch, anything. Take away the place where Genie came into being . . .

But how do you take away nothing? How do you destroy the figment of a dream?

Take a room in a house. You think of all the rooms in all the houses, and of what lurks and lingers, blind, meaningless, unseen. You never know.

And you ask yourself: will there be time?

Because you know, from your own memory coming back now, back out of childhood and the years gone by, you know how cruel and vengeful and terrible children can be. . . .

It is regrettable that there is so little satire in science fiction; the opportunities therefor implicit in the genre seem to us unlimited. It is an especial pleasure to us, then, to discover a writer willing to take advantage of those opportunities. Mr. Nearing's witty satire on the new science of cybernetics is his first published fiction. Hitherto he has written articles on Shakespeare and on the medieval legends of Julius Caesar for various scholarly journals, and many deft verses for "The New Yorker." Being a poet himself, Mr. Nearing writes of the mechanical brain designed to create poetry with particular sympathy, understanding and high humor.

The Poetry Machine

by H. NEARING JR.

"EVERYBODY knows that the mind is a machine," said Professor Cleanth Penn Ransom of the Mathematics Faculty. "Man up at M.I.T. wrote a book about it. When it goes crazy, it acts like an overworked electronic calculator. The mind, I mean."

Professor Archibald MacTate, of Philosophy, started to say something about Plato, thought better of it, and gazed silently at the huge, nearly finished hatchery of electron tubes that ran down the room.

"So if you have a machine that can go crazy and work differential equations," Ransom continued, "why shouldn't it write poetry, too?" He straightened his little body and his eyes began to gleam. "And better poetry. As much better—" he pecked a finger at MacTate—"as the equations are harder. Than the mind can do, I mean."

MacTate glanced nervously at the rows of tubes again.

"So when they put me on this job, I figured out how to make a poetry machine." Ransom looked at the tubes maternally. "There."

MacTate stared at the machine incredulously for a moment, then gave a low whistle.

"I know," said Ransom, "everybody thinks it's going to be a calculator.

But there's plenty of calculators. Harvard, Penn, lots of calculators. *We've* got a poetry machine."

"But —" said MacTate.

"That's where you come in," said Ransom. "Technical adviser. I fix the tubes to scan words out of Rozhay —"

"What?"

"R-o-g-e-t."

"Rahjet."

"All right. I fix the tubes to scan out words and look them up in the dictionary for accent and sound — so they won't rime *indict* and *predict*, I mean. I fix all that and the syntax relays, and then when the poetry comes out you say whether it's any good or not." Ransom smiled conspiratorially. "You teach aesthetics. You say it's good, everybody says it's good."

MacTate looked sardonic. "My dear Ransom," he said, "even assuming your last premise to be valid, how can this — these tubes really create poetry? One writes poetry about one's experiences. This — this machine has had no experiences." He waved at it disdainfully.

"Not at all. The experiences, I mean. Does a calculator have to have experiences before it works equations? Like a mind? Not at all. *You* give it the experiences. You tell it what experiences you want it to solve or make poetry about, and it does."

MacTate looked dubious.

"Look," said Ransom. "Suppose we want a poem, a great poem about, say, a man having trouble with his fiancée, which is what most poems are about. That's an experience. You feed it to the tubes just like a problem, but instead of reducing it to factors they reduce it to words."

MacTate still looked dubious.

"Come back Wednesday," said Ransom. He clapped his colleague on the shoulder. "Come back Wednesday and I'll show you."

To MacTate it seemed incredible that his friend of Mathematics should have been left so long to his own devices on so expensive a project. But that was the University, he reflected. Penny wise . . . And compared to the incompetents that had been placed in other positions of responsibility, well, Ransom. . . . How he had arranged the connivance or ignorance of the engineers constructing the machine was a mystery of epic potentialities. Perhaps he had converted them to poetry.

MacTate was a philosopher. It never occurred to him to report Ransom's activities to authority. On Wednesday he was back in the calculator building.

Ransom hurried toward him waving a piece of paper. "First fruit," he said breathlessly. "Just came off. Look."

MacTate took the paper and read aloud:

"Befetished nymphophobe and chastitute
Give pity to my ache — your hinted wines
Make desiccated hankering delight
And in my pectoral sing lubric tunes."

MacTate smiled. "Something Gallic about it, don't you think?"

Ransom ignored his colleague's levity. "Look at that first line. Blends. What do you call them? Portmanteau words. Didn't I tell you? Looked up roots in the dictionary and invented words. Roots. Didn't I tell you?" His enthusiasm was pure and childlike. MacTate lacked the heart to remind him that his interest in the line was more mathematical than aesthetic.

Ransom's eyes suddenly became sober. "There's just one thing that puzzles me," he said. "I'm sure I set the rime circuits up right. Nothing spoils a poem like a bad rime. But this doesn't."

MacTate peered over his shoulder and wagged a finger four times. "Analyzed," he said.

"What?"

"Analyzed rime. The riming vowels are interchanged in the last two lines. Instead of *ute* — *ines* we have *ight* — *unes*. A virtuoso device." He pursed his lips. "The machine may be smarter than you think."

Ransom looked at him. "You mean it started to take poetic license with rimes before it tried to do it right?"

"You might put it that way. It doesn't need experience, you know."

If there was irony in this, Ransom missed it. "I don't know." He shook his head. "I'd better check the rime circuits again."

MacTate was interested in the poem despite himself. "Hadn't you better take a few more lines before you change anything? Just to see what else it will do, that is." He laughed self-consciously. "Brain surgery is no light matter, you know."

Ransom did not laugh. "It won't hurt to check," he said. "Maybe some-

thing a little out of line we can fix without any trouble. Then we'll get real poetry. All you want."

The checking went on and on, and MacTate had to leave before it was over. It was not until the next day that he returned to the calculator building, which he was beginning to think of as the poetry building. A gang of young men swarmed about the machine plying implements and gauges of various sorts, while Ransom rushed anxiously from one to another presumably giving directions and advice. Seeing his colleague, he stopped and brandished a handful of paper slips. "Something wrong," he said. "Worked on it all night. Tubes won't answer. Ten times we tried last night and this morning, and all we get is this." He held out the slips. The top one said:

Cancel Cancel Cancel Cancel Cancel

The others said the same thing.

"I can't figure it out." Ransom rubbed his haggard face with a handkerchief. "You know it was working fine when you were here. Then we checked, and all we could find was just a little less capacitance in one circuit than we planned for. I can't see how it could make any difference. But we put in another condenser anyway, just to be sure. And now all we can get is these." He flapped the slips.

"Perhaps it was offended that you should suspect its riming talents," MacTate smiled.

To his astonishment Ransom started and looked at him with wild surmise. "What did you say? Do you think it could? The rimes, I mean." He clutched MacTate's arm and stared at the tubes. Then he looked at MacTate searchingly. "It *must* be. How did you know? That's what I've been trying to think of, but it wouldn't come out. The back of my mind, I mean. But you're right. What a silly thing to do, to suspect it. What a damned silly thing to do."

MacTate disengaged his arm and tried to speak in a soothing tone. "Ransom, old man," he said. "Rather a big job you've been doing here last night and today. Probably a drink wouldn't do you any harm. Let's suspend operations for a bit." He tried to pull the little man gently toward the door, but Ransom shrugged away and turned to the machine.

"No, wait. If I could apologize. How could you apologize to it?" He wrung his hands. "You know it was hurt. How can I smooth it over?"

MacTate felt it was time for bluntness. "I assure you, Ransom, I was only joking. You're being absurdly anthropomorphic about the matter. Now do come out for a drink and stop this —"

"All right," Ransom said. "The joke, I mean. To you it was a joke. You think I'm crazy. But it's not." He sighed patiently. "Look. Just listen calmly and I'll explain it. Then you'll be reasonable and help." He wiped his face with the handkerchief again. "Look. I know these machines better than you do. I should, I mean. And believe me, some of the things they do are — weird. Weird. You can say I planned wrong, and that one little capacitance was just right, so when we changed it, it spoiled the setup. But on my honor as a mathematician, I don't believe it." Ransom's eyes were desperate. He aimed a finger at MacTate and leaned forward. "Suppose you, now, were a bright young poet who figured out an ingenious kind of poetic license you weren't supposed to know about. And then you show it to people, and instead of applauding and asking for more, they jump to the conclusion that your setup is wrong, and start telling you how the conventional way goes. How would you feel? How did Keats feel? How did — the one that took poison."

"Chatterton."

"All right. How did they feel?" Ransom's eyes narrowed. "Doesn't it seem rather weird that the tubes are acting so much like that? Stubborn, I mean. Look at it with an open mind. You've had your feelings hurt sometime. Look at it that way." He turned to the machine helplessly.

MacTate tried hard to think of something sensible to say. The affair was becoming contagiously Lewis Carroll. Suddenly he had an inspiration. "You're right, Ransom," he said. "It's perfectly right that we should keep open minds, you as well as I. So we'll put it to a test. The machine, I — We'll put the question to a test." He clapped Ransom on the shoulder. "You will write an apology to the machine, phrase it so that it's unmistakably an apology from you to it, and send it through for versification. In that way the machine will be sure to read it. If a response of any sort is forthcoming, we shall have to accept your anthropomorphic premise. If, on the other hand, the machine persists in stuttering these cancels, we may proceed confidently on a physical basis."

Ransom's face was an ode to joy. "I'll do it," he cried shrilly. "I'll do it right now." Wiping his hands on the handkerchief, he hurried to a type-

writer at the end of the room and inserted a blank slip. MacTate watched over his shoulder. "Should sound as official as it can, shouldn't it?" Ransom said. He muttered the words as he pecked them out. "*I, the creator of this ingenious machine. . . . how's that? . . . do hereby apologize for criticizing its rimes and making it angry. . . . Ought to explain, I suppose. . . . It is just that I was expecting something different.*" He paused. "Probably should appeal to its reason, too. . . . *There is no need to go on this way. Please cooperate with us. . . . There.*" Without waiting for MacTate's opinion he jerked the slip from the typewriter and fed it to the machine. "Now." He turned to MacTate. "The answer-impulses work a typewriter here." He pointed. "All we can do is wait." He could not stand still.

Suddenly there was a click. Both men leaned over the typewriter as it tapped out the response.

The God is sorry for irascifying
The clever robot in re versifying
But of His expectations is dissanguine
And bids it Cancel Cancel Cancel Cancel

The tapping stopped. "Cancels again." In Ransom's voice there was a hint of a whine. He peered closely at the typewriter connections.

MacTate pursed his lips. "What do you suppose it was going to rime sanguine with?" Then he looked almost startled. "Unless — do you think it could be using the Rubaiyat stanza? Incredible. How could it know? But if it were, the last rime-word would be —"

"Never mind about the rimes," snapped Ransom. "I just want to make it quite Canceling." He noticed a group of engineers clustered around the center of the machine. "What's wrong down there?" he shouted. His voice shook. His hands were shaking too.

One of the engineers left the group and approached him. The young man smiled apologetically. "More trouble, doc," he said. "Central plexus, all burnt out."

Ransom blanched. "Burnt out? Why? What did you do?"

"Nothing we did. Just blanked out."

Ransom was close to fury. "Listen," he said. "Those things don't just do it themselves. Burn out, I mean. I've got to know what happened. If you —"

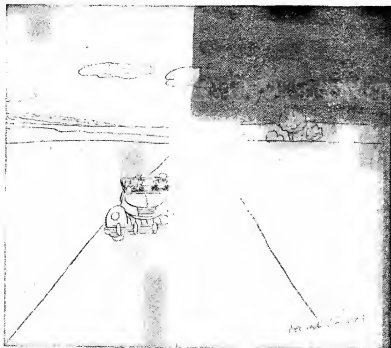
"But nothing happened, doc." The young man looked good-naturedly offended. "The circuit just went."

"Don't lie to me. Don't —"

"Now wait a minute, doc."

Ransom's face was livid. "You're lying," he screamed. "You're lying about your damned blundering." He threw himself violently at the engineer.

The young man pushed him back and Ransom fell to the floor. "Don't do that, professor. It's like I told you. Nobody did anything. It just went dead." He looked at the machine queerly and seemed suddenly to forget the little man on the floor. "Dead. Just like it had killed itself."



"Difference in time, you know."

A very faithful (and funny) record of what occurred when the ghost of a Highlander packed up his pipes and journeyed west to Canada. What happened? Well, as Phyllis Peterson says, the Scotsman quits haunting for pleasure and takes it up as serious business; he also helps solve the housing shortage! We are deeply grateful to Miss Peterson for the privilege of reprinting her story (first published in the Canadian Home Journal) of Steenie, who dutifully recognized his responsibility to the English family he had vowed, at Culloden, after the '45, to "haunt to the end of time and beyond."

Pamela Pays the Piper

by PHYLLIS LEE PETERSON

IT WAS at Culloden after the '45 that I laid the curse on the Wycherleys and I've held it heavy on them ever syne.

I ken fine that it was not myself who made the vow, being half-clemmed with fear and never the one for the fighting, like my brothers. But mark you now! There was this fair-haired giant of a Sassenach laying about me with his sword and the black beast he rode rearing over my head as I stood there on bleak Drummossie with naught but my hodden gray and the pipes to protect me. What else could I do?

So I laid my tongue on him and cursed him, vowing to haunt him and his blood to the end of time and beyond, and I sealed it with the oath of the men of Skye. Those were the last words I spoke in the flesh.

It would not have been so bad if I had spared the oath but my father had always thrashed it into me well that this was no light thing.

My father was a dour man and my brothers favored him. They thought me a fool and only tolerated me for the pipes and that I had the hand and the heart for them. It was the old man's boast that we were directly descended from the Lord of the Isles and had as good a claim to the Earldom of Ross as some others.

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He had been at Glencoe, had my father, and he taught us to honor the clan and to hate all traitors. For there was one of our own who betrayed his kinsmen there and I taste black shame when I say he belonged to a sept of the clan. My father saw him led to the Knoll of Judgment and the mark was put on him so that he and his descendants might be known to the Macdonalds forever. Then the Isles knew no rest until those who had dishonored us were rooted out, although some of them escaped and fled over the seas.

It is strange that my father was not more bitter against the Campbells for their part in Glencoe but he said they were always poor sheep that would do what they were bid, and that it was the black heart and glib tongue of one of our own that had stained the lustre of our shield.

Aweel! I have seen bloodshed since that makes Glencoe look like a small thing — although I would never put trust in a man of the mark. I have Macdonald's blood in me for that!

After Culloden I went to my forefathers in the Shades but they would have none of me because of the oath. My father was there before me, having fallen before the butcher Cumberland with most of my kin on Drum-mossie Moor, and he fixed me with a cold eye and escorted me personally, keeping an iron grip on my shoulder all the way, to Wycherley Castle deep in the heart of the green English countryside. He left me high on the cold stone battlements, and a forlorn figure I must have been as I stood there with my knees knocking together and watched him stride off into the sky.

It was a strange thing at first, being a ghost. For a time I thought I would die of it and then I remembered that I was already dead, and I sulked in a deserted tower room until, being Highland, I looked around for the peculiar advantages of my situation. There were a few and I made the most of them. I found that I could materialize when I wanted to and I practised doing it slowly until I got the hang of it. There's quite a trick to the art, especially with the lighting effects, and done properly it can be terrifying indeed. I scared myself into an ague the first time it came to me, and it was a wee while before I did it again. Then I tried it on the lasses who came up to the roof with their lovers to look at the stars and after a while they left the place alone. And on moonlit nights I would march up and down the battlements, skirling and swirling with the piobraichaid and terrorizing the countryside for miles around.

When I was lonely I would call on the Wycherleys below but they were

an easy-going, carefree breed and not easily ruffled. They came to take almost a pride in me and called me their piper. Sometimes they would come up to the tower when they had company and coax me down to meet their guests which was downright discouraging when I was trying to strike terror into their hearts. So it came to me that I was still the coof that my father and brothers had thought me, even as a ghost.

Then it was that I would dream back to my beloved Skye, the Isle of the Mist, with its rocky fields and sea-girt shore and the wind-swept acres that were ours, to the bonnie lasses and how they laughed at me in the heather. They would all seem very near to me for a while and then they would fade away.

It was a cold world and a dark one that I had fallen into! Cold with the grey stones in the moonlight, dark with the shadows of night. And as I marched deeper and deeper into time upon the battlements, strange things came to me.

It seemed to me then that old hatreds and black thoughts belonged to a past that had died at Culloden. All, that is, save what I felt for a Macdonald of the mark! That was bred in the bone and nourished on mother's milk and it passed on to the ectoplasm.

For two hundred years I haunted the castle, watching the Wycherleys come and go in an orderly line and coming to love the breed for their courage and integrity. And then it was Old Jamie's turn and all the bad luck that I had once wished on the family came to him I loved the best.

Old Jamie! James Edward, the last master of Wycherley. I watched him struggle to hold the shrunken estates he had inherited and saw his heart break when death came for his lovely lady. Then the black clouds of war spread to Wycherley and far beyond, and his son was killed over the channel with the R.A.F., so that there was only his lass Pamela to carry on the blood.

She was a determined hizzy, was Pamela, with the face of an angel and blue eyes to melt a heart of stone. There was sunlight caught in her soft fair hair but she had a cant to her chin and a set to her slim shoulders that was all Wycherley. Sometimes the curve of her lips put me in mind of a lassie I had known in Skye — aweel!

When the Nazis were in their strength, Pamela left Old Jamie and me and went up to London in a strange khaki uniform that I considered downright unmaidenly and I knew no good could come of such goings-on. I was right,

of course. For she fell in love with a foreigner, a soldier chiel with the word "Canada" on his shoulder and the undistinguished name of Clem Johnson. The only point in his favor was that he wore the red heckle and was of the Black Watch. And for all of that, it fashed me fairly when she married him, although Jamie said that perhaps it was a good thing for her to be a war bride and that Canada was a great new country and she would be happy there.

Poor Jamie! When the castle caught it bad and we stood together on the battlements in a night that was as bright as day, I think he knew it was the end and was not sorry. I stood over him as he lay amid the fallen stones of Wycherley and when the soul left his eyes — *ochann! mu chridhe!* — I fingered the chanter for the lament and played it up and down what was left of the battlements as if my heart would break until the echoes of it came back like thunder in the distance and I knew that the last master of Wycherley had passed over.

It came to me then how death could be a welcome thing and I cried out to my father in the Shades to let me come home but the curse was not yet ended. There was still Pamela!

So I haunted the ruins of Wycherley for a time and after the war, the place was sold for succession dues and taxes. When the workmen came to clear away the rubble I saw that there was nothing left for me but the emigration. It was a hard thing for one of my age to decide but my heart yearned for Pamela and so I made up my mind to follow her. I expected no great reception from the lass for she had always considered me more of a nuisance than anything else; nevertheless she was the last of the Wycherley blood and it was up to her to provide for me.

I had no great trouble in the crossing, sharing a cabin with a chieftain from Ottawa whom they called "Senator." He was somewhat surprised to see me at first but it turned out that his mother had been a MacNab and he had a great liking for the pipes. So I taught him the *Salute to MacNab* and the clan's *Gathering* and after that we got along famously. It was Senator who helped me to find Pamela for it seems that this Canada is a big place and I knew only that she had gone to a part called Ontario.

So it came about that I marched over a hill one night with the pale spring moon above me and into the town where Pamela and her husband lived with his people. I had no great trouble in finding the Johnson house, set back from

the street among the tall elms. But I tarried outside, my knees knocking together there in the cold, as I recalled the sharp tongue and the Wycherley chin of the lass. It took a stout heart to float through the door and up the stairs in search of her for I had always been a coward and Pamela in a temper was no light thing.

There were sounds of snoring from one end of an upper hall and so I judged that Clem's mother and father slept there and passed them by to make my way in the other direction. There I found Pamela deep in sleep, beside a long mound under the bedclothes that I knew was himself.

She was as bonnie as I remembered her and there was the look of the bairn she had been at Wycherley as she lay there with her soft lips parted in a smile and her fair hair spread about. I called her name gently and she opened her eyes. Then she shut them again when she saw me leaning in my plaidie there at the foot of the bed, and I heard her moan, "Oh no! Not that!"

"Wheest! Pamela, lass! 'Tis me, Steenie!" I whispered. "Or hae ye forgotten your piper already?"

She sat up abruptly.

"Go away!" said she. "Go back to Wycherley and leave me alone!"

Her words were like a dirk in my heart for though it was no more than I expected, yet it grieved me sore to see the ingratitude of the chit after all the trouble I had taken to find her.

"There's nae mair Wycherley, as ye ken fine!" said I, the Macdonald in me rising. "And since I maun haunt the family and there's nane but you left of them, it's here I am and here I'll bide!"

Then she fell to wringing her hands and weeping.

"You can't stay here with me, Steenie," said she. "For I have no home of my own and Clem and I must stay here with his parents. And we're crowded enough as it is, without a ghost around."

"A' this clishmaclaver about a house," said I, shifting the pipes for comfort as I stood there unwelcome. "I kenned fine nae guid would come of such a marriage. Has this Clem no siller to put a roof over his bride then?"

"Don't you dare talk like that!" said she, her blue eyes flashing. "It isn't a question of money. It's just that there's something over here called a housing shortage. . . . Oh, how can I make you understand?"

The mound beside her stirred under the blankets and I motioned to her to be tentie, else she would wake her husband.

"Dinna fash yesel' so, Lass!" I whispered. "I hae no doot that ye're over-come with emotion at seeing one that has known you from a bairn, and gin the truth were kent, it's nae all pleasure. But ye hae a roof over your head, though it's not your own, and I'm hoping ye'll share it with me until we find something better."

I could see that my words found her heart and such was my intention, for she sighed wearily and sank back upon her pillow.

"Go away, Steenie," she said in a voice that was kinder. "I'll see you tomorrow night when the others are asleep and then we can talk things over."

"But where maun I go?" I asked.

"Oh, go to —" There were words on the tip of her tongue that did not become a lass of gentle rearing.

"Go down to the basement and stay there until I come to you. And for heaven's sake, don't let anyone know you're there!"

"Aweel!" I shouldered the pipes and tucked up my plaid around me. "'Tis no more than I expected from one who's wed with an outlander!"

She made an angry motion as if to rise and I left her hurriedly and floated down through the house to the cellar, musing on the strange pass I had come to in a country that had no houses.

The cellar would have fitted into the smallest dungeon of Wycherley and it was cluttered with Pamela's crates and trunks piled everywhere, but it was warm and comfortable. I curled up by the hot water pipes and took a wee nap. Then, being rested, I explored the place and found a cupboard where some canny judge of Scottish whiskey had laid in a goodly store. So I comforted myself with one of his best bottles which was not unlike my favorite *uisge beatha*, the Gaelic "water of life." And being in the mood by then, I blew up the bag and tuned the drones for *Sir James' Salute* and *The Red Hand of the Macdonalds*, putting into the playing of them my skill with the grace notes which gives to the pìob mhor all the pathos and depth of the true Highland spirit. For although there are but nine notes to the pipes, a master player can bring out the half notes and thus release all the sorrow in them. And as I marched up and down among the trunks and packing cases in the Johnsons' cellar, I knew again the joy of grief in the playing.

All in all, it was not a bad night's work that I had done, and as dawn

crept in through the cellar windows, I felt a happiness that I had not known for some time.

I slept through most of the day, being only disturbed once or twice when people came down on errands. Once a sonsie woman fetched preserves from the shelves and then a sturdy wench brought down a pile of linen and entertained me greatly for a while by feeding it into a great cauldron that hummed as it washed the clothes and spat them out clean and ready to hang upon the lines.

Towards nightfall a short, stocky man with the look of Clem about him came down and shovelled coal on the fires. I sat quiet and invisible as he went over to the cupboard for a nip, and there was amusement in me when I saw his consternation over the empty bottle. He carried it over to the light near me where I reclined on the hot water pipes, and he cursed the one who had lifted its contents as if it were Old Hornie himself.

"'Tis not bad enough," said he, raising his voice to the rafters, "to have a strange cat wailing down here half the night, but now I find someone stealing my liquor!" And shaking his fist, he called on heaven to be his judge and went on at great length as to his intentions toward the intruder. But to tell the truth, I paid him no great attention for his blasphemy against the pipes made me finger the chanter lovingly so that a few notes crept eerily from it.

The white hair on his poll rose and he looked around for the source of what he had heard but his limbs were stronger than his curiosity and they carried him heltie-skeltie up the stairs so that was the last of him. I chuckled as I laid down the pipes and waited for Pamela to keep her tryst with me. The wailing of a cat, indeed!

It was in the wee dark hours that I heard the soft pad-pad of her feet upon the stairs.

"Steenie!" she whispered in the shadows of the cellar. "Are you there, piper?"

"Aye, lass. I'm here!" I said, minding to materialize slowly so as not to fright her, until the blue-green of my tartan shone bright before her.

"Oh, Steenie," said she, coming over to me so that her blue eyes looked into mine and I saw that they were full of tears. "I'm sorry that I was so rude to you for what must you think of the Wycherley honor now? It's just that I'm worried and tired. I've been house-hunting for weeks and it

seems hopeless to find anything. And when I saw you, it took me back to Wycherley and father and . . . and . . ."

She stopped, her chin quivering as she fumbled for a handkerchief in the pocket of her blue dressing-gown.

"And are they not good to you here?" There was pity in my heart for her as she stood there before me like a bairn that is lost.

"They've made me welcome and treated me as their own," she replied stoutly, fighting back the tears that were so close. "But it's not the same, Steenie. My heart is sick for home and a hearth of my own."

"I ken fine what ye mean," said I, thinking back to the lonely nights upon the roof of an English castle and to bright memories of Skye.

Silence fell between us then as we stood there, two exiles in a land that was not our own and a house that was not home.

"Even the poorest crofter has his own thatch," said I at last. "And since ye've come to this country, ye maun have a house in it fer yersel'. Is there no place in a' the toon here for ye then?"

"Oh, there is a house! A dear little house!" There was a light in her eyes again and her voice trembled with eagerness. "It's just up the road and over the hill and stands on a fine piece of land with a brook running by. There's open fireplaces and a lovely bright room upstairs for a nursery —"

She stopped and stole a sidelong glance at me through her thick lashes and I felt myself blushing. She was always a shameless hizzy, was Pamela, and I knew she was enjoying my discomfiture. Yet, for all of that there was joy in my heart to know that the Wycherley blood would go on for they were a fine breed and the world had need of them.

"Then why d'ye no buy the place?" said I and with that the brightness left her.

"It's owned by a horrid little man," said she sadly. "And he keeps on raising the price until now it's 'way out of our reach. The house is standing there empty and he goes every night to gloat on it while Clem goes over and over our budget to see if we can't possibly afford it. It's just impossible now, even with all our savings — and it's breaking our hearts."

There was a wee bittie of a plan taking shape in my mind, but first I had to find out her intentions to me and I fixed her sternly with my eye.

"Pamela!" said I. "Gin I get ye your house, will there be a place for me in it?"

"Oh, piper!" she turned to me eagerly. "If you get me the house, there'll be the attic and basement for you as long as you want to stay."

"And what about himself?" I asked cautiously.

"Clem? I'll handle him!" There was the Wycherley set to her chin and my doubts vanished like the wind over the heather.

"Ye swear ye'll take me in?" I asked.

"I swear it, on my word," she said. The bargain was sealed and I was satisfied.

"Then I'll just go out and look the place over," said I. "This purse-proud blackguard that owns it now —"

"He's Scottish like yourself, away back," said Pamela, watching me lift the pipes upon me. "It may be that you'd have some influence with him."

"There's but one thing will influence a Scot where siller's concerned," I told her. "And that's siller its ainsel."

The streamers hung from the drones to my satisfaction and I turned to leave.

"But he's no ordinary Scot," said Pamela eagerly. "He's always bragging of how his ancestors were men of mark in the Highlands!"

Her words struck an almost-forgotten chord in my heart and I put the pipes down and looked at her, the hot blood pounding in my temples.

"Men of mark!" I said slowly, turning the words on my tongue for the flavor of them. "Men of the mark!"

Pamela's eyes widened in surprise.

"What is it?" she asked.

"This . . . this creature!" said I, fixing her with my glance. "Tell me, lass. Does he talk of his connection with the Macdonalds?"

"Why . . . yes! That's his name, Mr. Macdonald. He says his ancestors left the Highlands after Glencoe. What's the matter, Steenie?"

Her voice rose in alarm as I felt the white rage of my father and stood at my full height to make room for the anger that came into me.

"Proud of his heritage, is he?" I roared, and Pamela fell back in alarm before me. "By Toshack of the Isles, I'll deal with the blackguard. Out of my way, lass, for I've a tryst to keep!"

"But you don't know where to find him," she said feebly as I made sure the pipes were fast upon my back and began to fade away through the walls of the Johnson cellar.

"I'll find him, never fear!" I flung back at her through the stone behind me. "Were he on the Hanging Hill of Duntulum itself, I'd find a man of the mark!"

What with my rage and another bottle of Mr. Johnson's whiskey that I had tucked away in my plaidie, I felt no cold nor wind upon me as I made my way along the road and over the hill in search of the house that was Pamela's heart's desire. There was no great difficulty to the finding of it save that I splashed into the burn that was swollen with spring as I neared the place, and when I stood before it, I saw that though the windows were dark and lifeless there was the look of home about it. The walls of grey stones from the fields gave it something of the air of Wycherley so that with light and warmth I felt it would do us well enough, and I noted with satisfaction the crenellation of stone about the roof for the playing of the pipes in the moonlight. So that all in all it seemed a fine enough place, although not very defensible.

As I passed into the house, I saw that the walls were solid and strong and once inside my impressions were confirmed. The rooms were large and the cellar, although unheated, was big enough to march up and down in. I took a nip from the bottle to warm me and went up to the attic and so out upon the roof from which I had a good view of the road below that led into the town. I strained my eyes as I stood there in the moonlight, the better to descry the small figure approaching in the distance.

"'Tis an ungodly hour," I mused, "for a mortal to be out walking. Gin it were a Sassenach, 'twould be for his health. And gin it were a Scot, 'twould be on business only!"

I saw as he came nearer that it was a small, thin man with a dour look about him and as he turned in towards our house, the moonlight shone full upon his pinched white face. He had the thin nose with sharpness to it that comes from generations of prying into others' affairs, and the same mean mouth as his ancestor who betrayed his kinsmen. For the mark was there, invisible to all save the eyes of a Macdonald but plain for me to see. And I knew him for the blood of a traitor!

Then it was that I withdrew from the roof and went through the attic quietly, down to the stairway that led from the main hall. I heard his key in the lock as he entered to gloat on his possession and while I waited for

him I called on the Shades to help me do the clan honor and at the same time, pay a just debt to the Wycherleys.

"For look you, my father," I whispered as I stood there on the stairs in the silence of the lonely house, "the Sassenachs have been good to me and I owe them a debt for shelter and consideration stretching over two hundred years. And though I have been a coward and a coof, yet maun I pay my debt. Also Macdonald's blood tells me that this is a man of our mark who comes before me now. Give me therefore some of the power of Blue Donald who so haunted Duntulum Castle that his own descendants left forever. So will Glencoe not be forgotten!"

So I prayed for power in my haunting, for where before I had practised the art for pleasure, this was strictly a matter of business and about it there must be no mistake.

I felt a crackling in the air about me and as I heard the intruder's foot upon the stair, I materialized with a rush using all my strength for the fluorescence. So that with my rage and a', I knew I was a fearful sight indeed.

I swooped down upon him like a cormorant and the hair rose slowly upon his head as he stood below me motionless, his limbs rooted to the step.

"Who are you?" he whispered in a voice that cracked with terror.

"A Macdonald of the Isles!" I roared and the empty house threw back the hollow echoes of it.

"What do you want of me?" he asked faintly, clutching the stair-rail for support.

"I want naught of a traitor's blood, with the mark upon him plain to my sight!"

There was derision and scorn in the laughter I flung at him.

"Only his absence from the place that I haunt!"

There was power in me so that I fingered the chanter and the wild reel of Tulloch burst from the pipes. Then I knew that the Shades were with me. For such was the rhythm of it that I moved my feet in its time and my philabeg kilt swung from side to side with the Macdonald tartan swaying. The streamers on the drones kept time and as the music rose higher and higher, the spindling shanks of the craven before me began to twitch and to move beyond his control and he danced a wild travesty of the reel while my music led him on. Faster and faster his legs and arms flung themselves

about until the tears coursed down his raddled face and he cried aloud for mercy. Then I laughed at him and played on as a cat plays with a mouse that has come her way until he would have swooned and I wearied of the sport.

The music died away and he fell into a heap, shaking and sobbing there at the foot of the stairs.

"Will ye go now?" I shouted.

"Aye, gladly!" I could just make out his words what with the sobbing and chattering of teeth.

"And never come back?" I said. And I made a motion as if to begin the pipes again.

"I swear it!" said he, turning to look for the door like a man who is sightless and his knees chattered together like dry bones in the wind.

I rushed down upon him and raised the war cry of the Macdonalds.

"*Fraoch Eilean!*" I roared. "The Heathery Isle!"

With that he uttered a thin wail of terror and turned, his legs moving faster and faster until he shot out of the door. I stood there and watched him as he ran down the road until his scraiching faded away in the distance. And one thing I'll say for him! He was as fleet as the deer in the hills and there was a power in his limbs that I would never have suspected as he went skittering off to vanish in the dawn that was breaking.

I mounted to the roof for the last sight of him and it was then I felt the chill of the Shades about me and turned to find my father beside me. His dour face shone white in the light of the new day and the lines of his face were as hard as I remembered them. When he finally spoke, his harsh voice was rusty with disuse.

"You have done well, my son! It is a Macdonald of the mark who flees before you and for that the clan is satisfied!"

He lay his hand upon me in a gesture that was almost affectionate and I who as a child had craved the touch of him, now shrank from the coldness of it.

"You may come home," he told me. "The curse is broken!"

His words caught me unprepared and I stood there silent as I gathered my scattered wits about me. For I knew then that the chill and darkness of the Shades held naught for me and I thought of Pamela and the bairn who would be Old Jamie's grandchild so that my heart swelled with love for the

Wycherley blood as if it were my own. And it came to me then that I could share the light and the warmth of them here in this home that would shelter them, and watch them become part of a land that was young and bright with its promise like themselves. Then I spoke that which was in me, marveling at my daring.

"If it will not displease the Shades," said I in a voice that faltered, "then I'll bide here!"

My father looked at me for a long moment and I thought I saw the suspicion of a smile upon his face.

"As you please, my son!"

He raised his hand in farewell and drew his tartan over his shoulder as he vanished. I was alone.

The sun was high in the sky the next day when my lassie came up to the roof.

"Steenie!" she said. "Steenie! We've got the house all signed, sealed and delivered. It seems Mr. Macdonald's had a nervous breakdown but his agent came to see us and let us have the place for a song. And oh, Steenie! I know it's all your doing. How can I ever thank you?"

I thought of her promise and was silent.

"You'll stay with us here in the new world, Steenie!" she said softly. "But there must be more than a cold bargain now between the Wycherleys and their piper."

I looked down into the sweet face of her and there was something there I'd never hoped to see. Then the soft touch of her lips was warm on my cheek and my heart surged with the swift joy of it all. For two hundred years is a long time without a kiss to sweeten it, especially for a Highlander. And though I had known better in Skye, still Pamela had paid her piper in full.

"Steenie!" she sighed. "You're wonderful!"

I blew up the bag and tuned the drones to cover my emotion.

"Aye, lass!" said I. Then I broke into the wild March of the Macdonalds, skirling and swirling there upon the roof with the triumph of it all, while Pamela watched me from a respectful distance, lost in admiration.



Time travel is impressive enough when elaborately decked out with oddly constructed machines, theories of temporomagnetic fields, and formulas involving the square root of minus one; but you can read such stories with a reasonable assurance that your own life is never going to involve such machines, theories or formulas. There is, however, another kind of time travel: the brief displacement, the slight fault in an otherwise ordered universe, such as once befell two maiden ladies in the gardens of Versailles. It is this unintentional, unpreventable time-slip that Roger Angell recorded with such detailed plausibility some two years ago in "The New Yorker" . . . precisely as it may happen to you tomorrow.

Just a Matter of Time

by ROGER ANGELL

CRAZY things like this probably happen all the time, and I suppose my reaction is just the same as anybody else's in the same position. At first, you think it just can't be, that there must be some simple explanation for the whole thing. Maybe Cromartie was drunk that night and just wrote down the wrong address by mistake. Or maybe it was his idea of a joke. But then, later on, you begin to wonder if there has to be a logical answer like that. Why not accept the simplest explanation of all? Anyhow, that's the way I look at it now. I've been thinking about it for months — time I wrote it down, while I remember it all. Anybody who wants to check up on me can ask Carol Cain. She was in on the beginning of it. And then there's my sister, down in Pennsylvania. You could ask her, though probably she just thought I was drunk or stupid the night I tried to take her to a place that didn't exist. Anyway, these are the facts, and you'll just have to accept them until I find Cromartie. And I *will* find him someday. I'm sure of that.

First of all, you have to know about me and Carol Cain. I guess, looking

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at it honestly, I have to admit that that's probably all over for good. But back last fall, Carol and I seemed pretty well set. It looked like a steady thing. And the funny part of it is that I can't say just what went wrong. I don't think it's the difference in our ages. I'm not what you'd call middle-aged yet — not in any way that matters. I've seen too many of my friends get out of touch with things in the last twenty years to let that happen to me. I can remember back when I used to see all my friends in the same places almost every night. And then they stopped coming. Some of them died or moved away, some got married, and some went broke for a while, but most of them just got out of the habit and stopped coming. Now I never see them any more. But I haven't let that happen to me. Right now, I can walk in anywhere and get a table — any place you mention. I see all the new plays, and I know all the interesting people. Why, there isn't a columnist in town I'm not on good terms with, and they treat me fine. They've never written a mean item about me yet.

I used to tell Carol these things, in a modest way, of course, but it just seemed to make her impatient. Sometimes, I think our breaking up had to do with my job as much as anything. Carol never wanted to know a thing about my work. I know that's fashionable with younger people nowadays. But there was a time when being a broker wasn't a bad joke, the way it is now. I tried to tell Carol that, too. "What's funny about a broker?" I'd say. But she never told me.

I'm putting that part down because this business started last fall, on the night Carol first got sore at me. I remember it was very early, no more than eleven, when I took Carol home. We'd been in one of the spots, but nothing had gone right all evening. Carol had picked up one of those earnest friends and they'd spent the whole evening talking about the atom bomb and Russia and Palestine. That sort of talk just leaves me limp with boredom, and as far as I can see, it doesn't accomplish a thing except make everybody nervous and irritable. Carol always went in for it, though, and it seems nowadays as if a person can't put in a friendly evening any more without talking about a lot of refugees and Reds and getting all neurotic about them. Anyway, Carol was no ray of sunshine that night, and as we drove down Park in a cab, she lit into me again for not saying anything all evening and drinking too much and being antisocial. *You* know. My God, me, Elliott Zachary, antisocial! That's a laugh. But I didn't argue the point.

I don't think we said much of anything the rest of the way, but just before we got to Carol's place, I tried to cheer her up a little. I said it was a damned shame that we hadn't kept prohibition. There used to be wonderful little places where a couple could go for a good dinner and some drinks and just have some friendly talk and a good, quiet evening together, but we voted them out of existence. Carol didn't go for it. When we got to her apartment, she said she was tired and she didn't want me to come in — no, not even for one, last drink. I couldn't very well ask her what had gone wrong — not right on the street — so I just said good night and walked off. I think that was the first time we'd ever left each other without making some kind of a date.

Well, it was still early and I still needed a drink. I walked up Park, feeling damned low and sorry for myself, and on Fifty-fifth I went into a place I hadn't been to in years, just on the chance I might meet somebody from the old days who could cheer me up. But the restaurant was jammed, like so many places now, and it seemed to be a brand-new bunch — lots of kids and people who looked like out-of-towners. I even had to wait a few minutes before I could squeeze in at the bar. I ordered a drink and asked the bartender if Armando was around, but even he wasn't there — off in his place in the country, the barman said. Even the restaurant owners have to go to the country these days. I was looking around, trying to find somebody I knew, when right next to me at the bar I heard a man order a Bronx cocktail. I turned around and looked at him, because my God, I mean it had been a good fifteen years since I'd heard anybody order *that* drink. And he was a young fellow, younger than I. But not as young, it turned out, as I thought at first.

He must have noticed that I was looking at him, because all of a sudden he asked me if he could buy me a drink. I was embarrassed about being caught giving the double-o, but he bought a round and we started talking. I had taken him for an out-of-towner, but no. Turned out he lived in the city. "I'm in the advertising game," he said. I said, "Oh, a huckster?," but he didn't laugh. Then, just being friendly, I said, "Four-oh-five-oh-hubba-hubba-hubba-hubba-sold American," the way they do on the radio. But I decided he was touchy about advertising, because he just looked at me in a funny way and said, "I beg your pardon?" So I laid off. I told him I

was a broker, and he asked if I knew anything good, which I thought was his way of ribbing *me*. We had another round, and I asked him if he knew Armando. He said he did, and I told him there was a time when I could have walked into Armando's any day of the year and found at least three or four of my friends there — friends that knew how to take a quiet drink without yelling and doing tricks with the silverware and spilling ashes on the tablecloth and arguing about the United Nations. Then he handed me a surprise. He started talking about this town, about this town in the old days, and, believe me, he knew it. He remembered little speaks and dives and headwaiters' names that I hadn't thought of in twenty years. The very same places I'd been trying to tell Carol about. It bowled me over, because he didn't look old enough to have been around then. We had a fine time there talking, and I almost asked him how come I hadn't seen him around any of the spots recently. But I figured maybe he'd been broke. I ended up telling him a little about how Carol and I hadn't been hitting it off so well and how I wished I knew a quiet little place to take her to for a change — any place that wasn't jammed with kids. While I was telling him, he began to smile, and when I'd finished, he tipped down his drink, pointed his finger at me, and said, "I've got just the place for you. C'mon. I'll phone up Leon and tell him about you, and you'll be in."

Right there, I made my mistake, in thinking that this stranger could tell me about a place in town I didn't know of. I should have kissed him off and gone home; then I never would have gotten into all this business. But he acted so sure of himself that I said fine. We walked past all the crowded tables to the phone booth in back, where he stepped in and made his call. I had a funny feeling there while this fellow was phoning; I suddenly caught myself wondering if this hadn't happened to me years before, maybe right in this same room, with me standing beside the phone while somebody (not a stranger but somebody I had known in college) was making arrangements for us to get in somewhere else. Maybe that was why we used to go out so much; it used to be so much more trouble and more fun to get into a new place. Then this man came out and handed me the receiver and I was talking to Leon. I felt like a hick, asking if there was any *possible* chance they could squeeze me in for dinner Friday night — just two of us. I felt like somebody in town for the first time. Leon said, "One moment, sir, while I speak to the boss," and left the phone off the hook. I guess the

phone must have been in the bar, because there was an awful lot of talk and laughing going on. There was a girl right next to the phone talking very seriously, and I wish now I'd listened more carefully, to hear what she was saying. She sounded very young. But I could make out the tune somebody was playing on the piano; it was "Singin' in the Rain," very soft and slow. Then the man Leon came back to the phone and, yes, the boss said any friend of Mr. Cromartie's would be welcome, and he asked my name. I had to give it to him twice, because the first time he said, "Hold it a minute, will you? I can't hear anything in here when that 'L' goes by." So I told him again, and I guess he must have known who I was, because he was very friendly.

Friend Cromartie was waiting for me at the bar and said he hoped everything had been O.K. Then he took out his wallet, pulled out one of his calling cards, and wrote the name and address of the place on the back. "I hope you can read it," he said when he handed me the card. "My friends keep telling me I write badly enough to enter that distinguished-hand-writing contest." But I know there's no mistake about the address he wrote, because I still have the card with me, with "Hugh Cromartie" engraved on it — nothing else — and on the back "Mr. Leon at Ray's" and then "117 West 46th Street" and a Longacre telephone number, written in his handwriting. I stuck the card in my pocket, we had another drink, and then I said good night and went home. All that time with him and you'd think I might have asked him once where he lived. But I didn't.

Next day, I woke up thinking about my screwy reservation, and I called Carol and said how's for Friday night in this funny place. I tried to tell her how I'd heard about it, but she was still giving me the freeze and it was no dice. Then, a couple of days later, who should call up but my sister Belle, just in from Cynwyd for a big weekend on the town. Belle always expects a free evening from me when she visits, so I told her we could try this new place I'd just heard about, and she said fine.

I don't know to this day whether Belle thought I was drunk, or playing a trick on her, or what. But then I never have been able to figure out what she thinks about me. I picked her up at her hotel at eight, and she really looked quite pretty. Belle is always much nicer when she's away from that husband of hers. I gave the cabby the address Cromartie had given me,

and I even began to think maybe it wouldn't turn out to be such a dull evening after all. But then we stopped in the middle of Forty-sixth, between Sixth and Seventh, and after I'd paid off the cab I turned around, and there we were in front of some big, modern building with a radio station in it, and Belle was looking sore.

I got out the card and checked the address again, but I'd told him right. There just wasn't any such place as Ray's — not that night, not at 117 West Forty-sixth. I was sore — sore at myself and at Cromartie — but I didn't even try to explain it to Belle, though she kept looking at me in that queer way sisters have, as if she thought I was losing my grip or something. We walked over to Times Square, where we finally ended up in one of those big Broadway spots. The evening got worse instead of better. The band gave me a headache and Belle just wouldn't go home until all hours.

I don't know what time it was that night when I suddenly sat up, completely awake and sober. I'd had a couple of aspirin and had been in a sort of sleep, but suddenly I was awake and thinking about that restaurant and that Leon on the phone. I remembered how it had sounded listening to the noise in that place, how the girl had sounded talking, and I remembered, sitting straight up in bed in the middle of the night, what the man had said on the phone: "I can't hear anything in here when that 'L' goes by."

Then I turned on the light and found the card with the address — 117 West, all right. Between Sixth and Seventh. And the Sixth Avenue "L" has been down and forgotten for God knows how long. Ten, twelve years anyway. There was no point in doing anything about it in the middle of the night, but you can bet I stayed wide awake until morning. My Filipino almost fainted when I came out, dressed and shaved, at eight o'clock. I gave him Mr. Cromartie's card and told him to phone the number on the back and see if Mr. Leon or anybody was there. I had two cups of coffee while he tried to phone the place, but finally he told me he couldn't get anything but a busy signal. I decided that somebody must sleep there who left the phone off the hook until the place opened, so I took the card back and told him never mind. Then, just for the record, I went out and took a cab over to 117 *East*. There was no Ray's there, either, but I was sure Cromartie wouldn't have made a simple mistake like that.

The minute I got to my office, I decided to phone Ray's again, and then, of course, I discovered what the trouble was. I even started dialling LOn-

acre 8098, but then I put the receiver down again with a sudden chilly feeling. There weren't enough numbers. There *had* to be an exchange number. After a while, I called the operator, and she told me I must want LOnacre 3- or LOnacre 5-8098. But I had been ready to dial L-O-N, which is LOnacre 6 if you look at your phone. And there's no such exchange. There hadn't been an L-O-N exchange since 1930; I called the phone company and they told me the date. I tell you, I haven't been dumb about this.

Well, there you have it. At least, all that happened back there last summer, all the things I've been thinking about and wondering about ever since. And don't tell me it never happened. I'm a man who doesn't imagine things (you can't do that in my business), though I can tell you there have been some moments since last fall when I wondered about myself. But I have Cromartie's card; I have it in my wallet this minute. Of course, Cromartie's the one I've been thinking about. How come none of my friends in the advertising business have ever heard of him? And, come to think of it, how long has it been since I've heard anyone say, "I'm in the advertising game"? People don't say that any more. And, finally, there's Cromartie's crack about his handwriting — "that distinguished-handwriting contest." How did he remember that, just in casual bar conversation? It took me a couple of days before I could pin that one down; it was the Marlboro-cigarette handwriting contest — way back in the thirties, at least.

For a while, I thought Cromartie had played a joke on me. But then, why would he do that? It would be a bad joke, especially on a stranger. He had no reason to pull something like that on me. I decided I just had to find Cromartie again. The very next week, I went back to Armando's, but even Armando himself didn't know anybody by that name, though Cromartie had said he knew Armando. He wasn't in the phone book; I called the one Cromartie listed, but they didn't know my friend. Then I began taking a drink in some of the old places — any place that had been in business since before repeal — hoping Cromartie would drop in. But nothing doing. I've even watched the obits.

I did one funny thing. I had that guy so much on my mind, and the address and the phone number, that I even went back to Armando's again to make the phone call to Ray's. I just wondered if maybe on that one phone

there Cromartie might not have been able to get some screwy connection on a nonexistent number, God knows to where. But of course it didn't work — not for me.

I'm going out now to look for Cromartie again. I don't know why, but I'm absolutely sure I'll find him, sooner or later. I thought I saw him the other day on Madison, but he got into a cab before I could cross the street. But that's probably the way I'll find him — just meeting him on the street somewhere, or in an elevator. In a town like this, you're always running across the same people, so it's just a matter of time. I'll meet him, and this time I'll make him come with me to the place.

I keep wishing I had listened to that girl over the phone when she was talking. If I had listened, I could have heard what she was saying, I'm sure, because she was right by the phone. I've got the idea she's probably a thin girl, like all the girls then, looking even younger than she is, with her face hidden under one of those round cloche hats. Everybody seemed much younger then. She probably talks about all the regular things people talked about then, and if I can meet her, I'll probably discover that she's very intense about them. I find I can remember them all very clearly, those old things people talked about then. Easy things, like Michael Arlen, and Grover Whalen, and Al Smith, and Lee Tracy in "Broadway," and "Why do you drink those awful Orange Blossoms in a good speak like this?" Oh, I'd be able to get along all right. Evenings go very fast there, I'm sure, and chances are they end up just the way they used to: "Shall we go on to Mino's or Connie's Inn, or would you rather just go straight on home?"

Note:

If you enjoy THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, you will like some of the other AMERICAN MERCURY PUBLICATIONS:

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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Recommended Reading

by THE EDITORS

THE outstanding event of the publishing season to this date — and quite likely of the year — is the publication of Ray Bradbury's *THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES* (Doubleday). This superbly organized collection of Bradbury's stories about Mars, its people and its conquests by Earth leaves the reader with the sense of having read history interpreted by a poet. All of Bradbury's great qualities are here; his soaring imagination, his profound realization of people and places, his moral sense (a rare thing in science fiction!) and his ironic (and sometimes grisly) humor. These stories of high adventure, mood, character, social criticism more than justify Merle Miller's estimate of Ray Bradbury as one of America's finest young writers in any field.

It is indicative of the high stature science fiction and/or fantasy publishing is attaining to note that *THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES* is narrowly the leader in a superlative lot of books. The leaders in each category follow.

SCIENCE FICTION NOVELS

Best: Fritz Leiber's *GATHER, DARKNESS!* (Pellegrini & Cudahy). One of the most imaginative and compelling magazine serials seems even better on rereading in book form — an extraordinary fusion of scientific and sociological thinking with an evocation of horror worthy of M. R. James. Valentine Davies' *IT HAPPENS EVERY SPRING* (Farrar, Straus) is as delightfully absurd as the film epic of the wood-repellent baseball on which it is based. Frank Norris' *NUTRO 29* (Rinehart), the story of the impact on civilization of a cheap food-substitute (a fable almost identical with Al Capp's legend of the shmoo), is a perceptive and penetrating satire — if drawn out to almost unbearable length.

SCIENCE FICTION SHORT STORIES

While the two following writers have assembled collections of their stories that are of great merit, it is difficult to determine an absolute top-notch. *THE MAUROIS READER* (Didier) offers a huge cross-section of André

Maurois' writing which shows the biographer of Proust to be also a writer of exciting (and disturbingly prophetic) science fiction. So many writers of high repute in other fields have done so much excellent fantasy and science fiction! Novelist Robert Graves' *OCCUPATION: WRITER* (Creative Age) contains, in its provocative assortment of literary oddments, four fantasy and two science fiction shorts that are delightful and stimulating.

SCIENCE FICTION ANTHOLOGIES

Best: BEYOND TIME AND SPACE, edited by August Derleth (Pellegrini & Cudahy). It is pleasing to note that both this and Martin Greenberg's *MEN AGAINST THE STARS* (Gnome Press) are not indiscriminate collections, but are "planned" anthologies and as such are highly recommended. Derleth has succeeded admirably in his attempt to "glance backward over the stream of science fiction," bringing together the much discussed — but too seldom read — classics of the field, such as Plato's *Atlantis*, Kepler's *Somnium* (in a first published English translation by Everett F. Bleiler), as well as some of the best efforts of writers like Wells, Verne, Stockton, Weinbaum, Padgett, Heinlein and Bradbury. Of considerably less literary quality, the Greenberg collection nevertheless presents a very convincing picture of the steps in the conquest of space. Perhaps the best piece in the book is the introduction by Willy Ley.

FANTASY NOVELS

The past few months have produced three imaginative novels so completely admirable in concept and execution that we find it flatly impossible to pick a best-of-the-period. In alphabetical order by author these are Eric Linklater's *A SPELL FOR OLD BONES* (Macmillan), a satiric epic of First Century Scotland complete with giants, battles, sex, humor and an Elizabethan amplitude of wording and color; Helen McCloy's *THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY* (Random), nominally a detective story, but actually an eerie study in the phenomenon of the Doppelgänger, fetch, or phantom double, handled with such disquieting ambivalence that the "rational" solution seems only an instance of man's folly in the face of the unknowable; and Charles Williams' *THE GREATER TRUMPS* (Pellegrini & Cudahy), one of the most stirring and vivid works of the late mystical melodramatist, rich in triumphs from its amazing concept of living golden Tarot figures to its extraordinary portrait

of a faintly muddleheaded female saint. Only a little below these (and that largely because of structural flaws) is Sylvia Dee's *DEAR GUEST AND GHOST* (Macmillan), a charmingly absurd picture of a pleasant ghost's relations with a Staten Island family, whose speech the author has observed with a phenomenally acute ear.

NON-FICTION

Best: *POPUL VUH* (University of Oklahoma). Around 1555 an anonymous Quiché Indian wrote down the traditions of the Mayan people, and in so doing produced what has justly been described as the one great creative work known from a Pre-Conquest American. Now, Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley give us, based on the definitive Spanish version of Adrián Recinos, the first complete English translation — which proves to be one of the most fascinating and skillfully told fantasy narratives in all folk literature. The *POPUL VUH* has become familiar in another context recently; it is frequently quoted in Immanuel Velikovsky's extraordinary *WORLDS IN COLLISION* (Macmillan). Frankly, your editors want no part of the extremes of facile gullibility and scientific dogmatism that have characterized the two sides of the controversy raging around Velikovsky, but strongly recommend his book, whatever its defects, as the liveliest imaginative stimulus since the days of Charles Fort.

REPRINTS AND REISSUES

Best: Talbot Mundy's *THE DEVIL'S GUARD* (Oriental Club). Mundy mated high adventure with a sincere and deeply understood occultism and rich, slightly larger than life characterizations in a manner matched by no one since Rider Haggard. This reissue of possibly his most exciting novel is intensely welcome, as are his posthumous *OLD UGLY-FACE* (Wells & Shakespeare) and his non-fiction essay on mystic thought and practice, *SUNRISE* (Wells).

Stop press addendum: Despite all debates on dianetics and colliding worlds, we feel that the year will not produce a factual book more important to science fiction enthusiasts (and possibly to all mankind) than Donald Keyhoe's cogent, intelligent and persuasive *THE FLYING SAUCERS ARE REAL* (Fawcett) — a two-bit pocketsize original deserving more serious attention than most four-dollar hardcover books. This is your *must* of the month.

George Whitley, seafarer — he has been a second officer in England's Merchant Navy — first published this story in "Town & Country" . . . an unlikely place to find a chronicle of grue! For this is a gruesome tale indeed, and one with a grisly moral: If once you meet a ghost and escape the encounter unscarred, never go near the meeting-place again, ever! Perhaps there is even a second moral to the story; something to the effect that people, wherever they live, shouldn't throw stones . . .

Second Meeting

by GEORGE WHITLEY

It was always dark and gloomy down by the canal: The old, tall buildings, irrespective of the time of day, obscured whatever sun there was. After dark a mist — sometimes tenuous, sometimes almost opaque — crept up over the slimy cobbles from the narrow strip of fetid water and stretched avid, impotent fingers toward the dim flames of oil or gas behind the dirty windowpanes. Like a ghost it was — a grimy wraith bred of the dirt and decay of the city, hungry for the life sensed within those mean dwellings.

And a *real* ghost there was, they said — the phantom of a bent old man which was seen to cross from the north bank by the bridge at Linwood's warehouse, a ghost which walked with deceptive speed in the direction of the Hope and Anchor. And there it vanished. Or so they said.

Not that we placed much credence in their tales. It was only natural, we argued, that London's East Side boys should attempt to convince us that, in one respect at least, their squalid neighborhood was superior to the clean, trim housing estate by the park. We had no ghosts. Only a very few people could have died in our houses whose bricks had not yet lost their raw, red newness. But Trant, leader of the East Side gang, was adamant.

" 'Tis so!" he reiterated. "I've seen 'im. A little old gent no taller'n me.

An' 'e comes tap-tapping along wiv 'is stick wiv the silver knob — only there ain't no tapping."

"There *are* such things as rubber-tipped ferrules," said Malcolm in his most superior voice.

"There ain't!"

"Stow it, Malcolm!" Outwardly Langley was, as always, bored; but we who knew him could see in his eyes the little glints that betokened some scheme taking place in the reckless brain behind them. "Let Trant finish."

"Yes, let Trant finish," I echoed smugly.

"There *ain't* no tapping, nor no footsteps," growled the East Side boy defiantly. "An' 'e's dressed all old-fashioned like. An' 'e comes gliding along wivout a sound an' " — this was the denouement — " 'e just vanishes inter thin air outside Irish Monaghan's pub!"

This was too much for us. We roared.

"Into Monaghan's pub, you mean!" spluttered Malcolm, wiping his eyes in an exaggerated gesture. "Into —"

"Hold it!" Langley's voice held a note of easy authority. He had seen that the East Siders were grouping themselves about their flushed and sullen leader, that fists were being clenched, that more than one half-brick had been lifted from the stunted, pallid grass of the waste ground on which we had met. "Have you seen him — *it* — vanish, Trant?"

The other hesitated. We could see the desire to lie struggling with the grudging respect he felt for Langley. Trant turned to his followers as though for support.

"I — I've follered it, fellers — 'aven't I?"

"You 'aven't." The flat, definite statement came from an undersized, rat-faced youth with red hair. "You 'aven't. You was scared outer your skin — sime as the rest of us."

The others took up the chorus: "Garn!" "You foller a ghost?" "Yer too frit to foller pussy!"

It was time for Trant to reassert his authority. He took a swift stride forward, caught Redhead a stinging buffet on the ear. "There's more ter foller," he added darkly, then turned to face the rest of his gang. "Anyone else?"

There was a short silence broken only by the loud sniveling of the martyr to truth. The East Siders shuffled their feet uneasily. Perhaps, had we not

been there, they would have pulled down their leader. Langley, sensing this, flung a question into the tense situation: "So you didn't follow it?"

"No, Mister Bloody Langley, I didn't. An' nor would you. Oh, it's fine an' easy to stand 'ere and poke fun in broad daylight in the open — but wait till yer there in the dark, wiv the stinking fog creeping up from the canal, an' maybe a little twisted bit o' moon playing hide-an'-seek be'ind the roofs and chimbley pots. It does something to yer guts when yer sees it flitting over that bridge. All yer can do is 'ope that it won't see yer, that it won't stop when it comes to yer — and when it's past, yer thanks Gawd and runs like 'ell the uvver way!"

"Interesting," said Langley slowly. "About what time does it walk?"

"Rahnd abaht ten." Trant's face was screwed up in an effort to remember. "No — lemme see — when I see it, the church clock was strikin' a quarter past just as it came over the bridge. Quarter past ten on the bridge."

"Can you be there tonight? Say at about a quarter to? The other side of the road from the bridge?"

Trant gaped. "Why? Will you be there?"

"Yes. What about you, Malcolm?"

"You know, Langley, that my mater —"

"Mummie's darling," muttered the red-headed youth.

"What about *you*, then?"

"Me old man —"

"You ain't got no old man!" Trant was viciously triumphant. "You'll be there, Redhead, if I 'as to drag yer!"

Langley scanned the thinning ranks of his adherents. There was an outbreak of coughing; a few glanced at cheap wrist watches and announced that it was time that they were getting home. Both groups melted away by ones and twos. The two leaders looked at each other, and a glance of understanding passed between them. Trant spat with emphasis.

"Well," said Langley, "I have at least got Fido."

"That's what you think!" I protested feebly.

"But you wouldn't miss it for worlds, would you, Fido?"

"Mum and Dad —" I began.

"Anuvver one!" snapped Trant.

"Let me finish! Mum and Dad won't mind my being late if they think I'm at your house."

"That's easily fixed. My folks are going to a show, and won't be back much before midnight. I'm supposed to be swotting for matric. You can say that you're coming 'round to help me. Be there about seven or so — then we'll meet these two by the bridge at nine forty-five. O.K. by you, Trant?"

"Yus. An' if yer not there, yer'll never live it down!"

"Neither will you. We'll be seeing you!"

We were a little late at the bridge. It didn't matter, for the two East Siders were even later. As they appeared, Redhead walking with a certain reluctance, the church clock had finished chiming and was halfway through its ten bass strokes.

"Ad ter drag this bloke away from 'is wench," explained Trant. "'E 'ad a date."

"Couldn't *she* come?" I asked fatuously. Women were still a mystery to me, and I had the idea that an East Side girl might be far easier to know than one of my own class.

"Course not. This ain't no job for skirts."

Redhead said nothing; he just looked sullen and vicious.

Langley produced a packet of cigarettes, offered them first to Trant. They were struck from his hand.

"You fool! If 'e comes an' sees the lights —"

Then Trant took charge. After all, it was his bailiwick. Almost fussily he shepherded us into a dark alley running at right angles to the road. Here we should be secure from observation from the bridge. It struck me, even with my limited knowledge of life, that it was strange we were disturbing no courting couples. But I suppose that the evil reputation of the locality ensured its desertion after dark.

During the brief quarter-hour we waited, there were no passers-by. Somewhere, not too far away, two cats were singing a duet of either love or hate, and somehow the commonplace sound was comforting. Not that, at first, psychological discomfort — the fear of the supernatural — held sway. At the beginning of our vigil we were acutely conscious of what were purely physical drawbacks to our position.

It was damp underfoot, and the cold struck up through the soles of our shoes. I had trodden in something as we entered the alley and it had stuck

to my foot. Every time I tried to scrape it off, Trant shushed fiercely, and Langley would give me a painful dig in the ribs. A smell of rotting garbage competed with the sour stench — possibly the effluent from some factory — of the canal; and the thin, pallid mist curled up from the murky water and made our throats and lungs raw, filling us with an almost unbearable urge to cough.

The clouds overhead, driven before a chill northeaster, thinned a little, and intermittent shafts of moonlight struck through. Their pale, transient radiance accentuated rather than relieved the darkness; during their brief, flickering life it was no lighter, but with their passing the shadows rushed in a thousandfold. Once I ventured out of the mouth of the alley to peer up and down the road. The sky, over the buildings across the canal, was momentarily clear, and the moon, as Trant so aptly phrased it, seemed to be playing hide-and-seek among the roofs and chimneys of the ugly, jagged skyline. But it wasn't the moon of the clean open spaces. Rather it was a white, polished skull, rolling in some devil's game along the black, irregular ridge. I ducked back hastily, evading the joint attempt of Langley and Trant to pull me back. Redhead started to whimper.

Remote and silvery, speaking of an order of things far distant from this noisome squalor, the church clock chimed the quarter hour. I became aware of a sharp pain in the upper part of my right arm — Langley, unconsciously, had it in an iron grip. Trant was breathing heavily in my left ear. "Look!" I heard him gasp. Someone, *something*, was coming over the bridge.

It seemed to us then that the advancing figure was limned in its own pale light; it may have been only that it was in reality far less dark than our disordered nerves had led us to believe. But we could see it — *him* — with startling clarity. Just a little, bent old man whose cloak, or cape, hung around him in straight, heavy folds. He was bearded, but that is the only impression we got of his face. On his head was a top hat of ancient design, and in his right hand was a long, straight stick with a silver knob which gleamed dully in the half-light.

His progress was singularly swift and silent. In less than no time, or so it seemed, he had crossed the bridge and was coming straight for where we were hidden. It seemed impossible that he would not see us.

Trant confessed afterward that he wanted to run, Langley that he wanted

to scream. I wanted — and I won't deny it — to do both. Had I been by myself I should have done so; but the fear of losing face before the others was even greater than my fear of the unknown. So I did, instead, a very foolish thing.

There was a large stone at my feet — I had tripped over it as we entered the opening. Shaking off Langley's grip, I stooped and picked it up before the others could stop me. I hefted it for a moment in my hand. As the ghost came abreast of our hiding place, I let fly. For about five horrid seconds I thought that my heart had stopped beating — permanently. There was no sound of impact, yet I could have sworn I had not missed. We reasoned afterward that the stone must have caught in the folds of the cloak and hung there an appreciable while before dropping. Be that as it may, the time lag between my action of throwing it and the sound of its impact on the cobbles lent verisimilitude to the illusion that it had gone right through the apparition.

But the ghost himself lost no time in dispelling any illusions we might have about him. He stopped dead, stood for a moment peering into the mouth of the alley. He raised and brandished his long stick — a weapon that already, in imagination, we could feel descending upon our deserving posteriors. And then he spoke, in no uncertain terms. It was not the kind of language one associates with the dear departed; it was redolent of the East Side and just what one would expect from an habitu  of Monaghan's Hope and Anchor. When he came toward us with swift, angry strides, we stood not upon the order of our departure. Luckily the alley was not blind, although the going, over cobblestones and deposits of nameless filth, was sticky.

And that was all there was to it. When we had gained a well-lighted road, and were confident that we had shaken off pursuit, we stopped to compare notes.

"I knew all along ther' was no such things!" boasted Redhead.

Trant made a menacing gesture, then let his hands fall to his sides. He seemed deflated and more than usually sullen. The greatest glory of the East Side was no more — and with it had gone much of his prestige. Worst of all, the ghost had been laid with the help of outsiders, foreigners. It was hardly surprising — although at the time I felt rather hurt — that he did not fall on our necks and thank us.

Then we all went into a fish and chips shop where Langley treated us to a greasy twopence worth apiece, said our good-nights, and went our ways.

"You know," said Langley, throwing away the newspaper which had held his chips, "you've made an enemy there, Fido. I shouldn't go down by the canal by myself if I were you."

It must have been at least ten years before I was ever near the canal again. Shortly after the stone-throwing incident, my father accepted more remunerative employment in a distant town and we moved. It was surprising how soon I lost touch with all the old crowd. Langley and I did correspond for a matter of months — but letters are, at best, a poor substitute for actual companionship.

And then, a full decade after the ghost-laying, business called me back to London. Staring intently out of the car window, as the train crawled through the slums which form the station approaches, I found myself identifying old landmarks, recalling with nostalgia old feuds and adventures. It was then that I resolved as soon as my business was concluded to look up Langley. Yes — *and* Trant.

Langley was not to be found. The people living in what had been his home had never so much as heard the name. Malcolm was still at the old address, still living with his parents. I spent a dreary evening with him and his people, excusing myself early so as to have time for a quick one before the pubs shut. It was then that I remembered Irish Monaghan's Hope and Anchor. It would be far better than the too-hygienic hostelrys by the park — the damned places always put me in mind of converted public lavatories — and it would much more effectively wash the dreadful taste of petty-bourgeois respectability from my mind. And I might — if he were still in the city I almost certainly should — find Trant there. And, perhaps, the ghost. But *he* was probably really dead — and lying down — by this time.

While I was thinking, remembering old scenes and faces, my feet were carrying me down once more familiar ways almost without volition. With a start I found myself in the alley up which we had fled to escape the righteous wrath of the old man. It was better lighted now — electricity had extended its blessings to this quarter of the city. But the sparse street lamps seemed to be trying to emulate their gas- and oil-burning predecessors. The usual mist was creeping up from the canal.

And then, by Linwood's warehouse, I turned sharp right to take the canal road to the Hope and Anchor. Perhaps I had some premonition of danger; perhaps, even in my preoccupation, I heard some stealthy movement behind me. I can't remember. But before I could run or even turn to defend myself, something crashed down on my neck at the base of the skull, and the slimy cobbles came up to me.

I lay numbly, powerless to move or speak. There were hands on me, running through my pockets, tearing out my wallet and watch and key case.

"Gawd!" said one — I recognized his flaming hair, his sharp features — "Do yer know 'oo this is? It's 'im wot they called Fido. Yer shouldn't 'ave 'it so 'ard, Basher. Yer shoulda let 'im go!"

"That's just why I did cosh 'im proper!" snarled Trant. "I never could abide those stuck-up little bastards from the park. Now there's one less!"

"But it ain't right, Basher. It ain't right. We knew 'im in the old days. 'E was one o' the mob, yer might say."

"Not of my mob, 'e wasn't. Wot's come over yer, Red? That dirty little skirt of yours is more of a man 'n wot you are!"

Red colored, silently helped Trant to rifle my clothing.

"That's all," said Trant in a matter-of-fact way. The silvery notes of the church clock chiming a quarter past the hour were an incongruous accompaniment to his coarse and hateful voice. "Inter the canal wiv 'im!"

"Gawd! 'Ere's someone coming!"

I breathed a prayer of thanks. I still could not move, but I felt no pain — nothing except the numbness of shock, the kind of numbness which promises an agony soon to follow. It's strange how one always thinks of something utterly unimportant on such occasions. The rain was soaking what had been a good serge suit, and I was wondering if they'd ever be able to clean it decently — and then I saw who it was coming over the bridge — an old, bent man in old-fashioned clothing, carrying a long, silver-headed stick.

I think that if I could have done anything in that moment, I would have laughed. The drab ancient, still pursuing what was probably his only pleasure — his punctual nightly pilgrimage to Irish Monaghan's — and the whole ghost-story framework we had built about the harmless old chap; the evening of thrilled watching for him, and the terror we allowed the stick in that frail old hand to inspire in us that night — these things,

in that helpless moment, seemed excruciatingly funny, in the face of the fact that I now owed him my salvation.

He saw me. Silently, swiftly, he approached. His withered lips parted to show a few yellow stumps. "More o' the Basher's work," he muttered, and cackled. To my annoyance he put out his stick and prodded me.

It hurt. I cringed away, and with a tremendous effort sat groggily up and grasped the stick, to prevent a repetition of the act. Even through my annoyance, I wondered what he would say if he knew who I was.

I didn't wonder long. He bent down and squinted into my face. "Well, well, well," he marveled, "if it ain't the young scut 'as 'caved 'arf a brick at me once."

I grasped his shoulder — the material of his quaint old coat felt rough and wet — and heaved myself upright on trembling legs. I laughed weakly. "I'm glad I have the chance to apologize to you," I said. I hobbled with him toward the pub.

He snickered. "'Ow you scampered! Wish I could 'ave caught yer, I do. Wot did yer do it for?"

I glanced at him shamefacedly. "We thought you were a ghost."

He grunted. "If I *wus* a ghost in them days — which I *wus* — I'd 'a' been bloody put out if some young oaf 'ad pitched a bleedin' rock right through me. Wouldn't you?"

I stopped and turned, and before I could respond to this astonishing speech, I saw what was lying back there in the alley. I saw it over his solid old shoulder, and I knew what he was, what he — and — and I —

There was a body in the alley. A dead body.

Mine.

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In no type of fiction — not even the detective story or the western — has the element of love been less important than in science fiction. Women in the fictional future, aside from a few spectacular Evil Empresses, seem to exist chiefly for the purpose of keeping house for their Mad Scientist fathers, or wearing scanty space suits while being abducted by monsters. Which is why we find, and trust you will agree, something unusually moving in this story (by a Connecticut patent attorney!) — a saga of the infinitely remote galactic future, complete with spaceships, androids and vivid melodrama; but at the same time an intensely human story, in which love, both spiritual and physical, is the mainspring of the plot.

Heritage

by CHARLES L. HARNESS

THROUGH the porthole the planet mocked him with her crescented grin, and the uman found no word to utter his gloom.

Terraport in twenty-four hours. After that, stagnation.

The moment that he had been dreading all during the interminable routine of the long return was very near. For him, life was over, finished, done. Indeed, he had almost ceased to live five years ago, when his great vessel had planted its last handful of youthful ship-born colonists on that final planet of the conquered Magellanics.

After that, no stimulus remained to divert him from his thoughts. Unable to avoid them any longer, and grimly aware that they must destroy him, he had finally bared his conscious mind to them.

Thus, for months on end, watch cycle after watch cycle, he had sneaked off into this deserted birth room, with its empty tiers of foetal cells, and here pondered that enormous gap in his being, that nameless gnawing which he could never appease, and which he could evade only in battle. Here he mused over the mysterious abyss that isolated him from his myriad cell mates and their galactic heritage.

And as the months passed, it had sometimes seemed to him that only his beloved battleship was preserving him from complete disintegration; his ship with its precious memories of blood, hate, and death; his ship with its sheltering song of great jets; his ship, which he'd soon leave forever.

He fought down an almost irresistible impulse to break his skull open against the implacable image framed by the porthole. With a curious objectivity he followed the familiar inner struggle: death wish versus life hunger. He knew how that would end, how it always ended.

He lifted the bottle of ethanol to his lips, and took a big swallow. He grimaced, both at the raw taste of the liquid and because it declared another of his abnormalities: he, Captain Lurain, was strangely influenced by the oral administration of ethanol. None of the other five thousand-odd umen under him, nay, not a single other uman in the galaxy, so far as he knew, was similarly defective.

Yes, he was an odd one. His physical responses were the slowest on the ship. In single combat with a Magellanic battleman he would have been burnt down before he could even make a motion toward the pistol that hung at his side. And every one of the five thousand under him was faster even than the Magellanics.

Firing computations that would have taken him weeks, his gunnery subalterns made mentally in a few seconds. And as for astrogation! For years he had simply rubber-stamped Lieutenant Hykane's charts.

And yet, he had become captain of all these superb minds and bodies, and despite the fraud and cunning that had put him where he was (or perhaps because of it?) he knew there wasn't a better captain in the fleet.

He took another pull at the bottle and simultaneously began to feel better — and worse.

He removed his visor and wiped at his forehead with his tunic sleeve. There was another defect: with him, perspiration was involuntary. The normal uman perspired only to cool himself, and at will. He passed his hand over his scalp, feeling the short stubble of his hair — that freakish keratinaceous growth that troubled no other uman. It also grew on his face and other parts of his body, and only by the constant use of certain chemicals was he able to keep fairly well rid of it.

He sighed, replaced the visor, and was about to lift the bottle again when he heard a faint noise from beyond a wall of birth-cells to his right.

From somewhere over there a light had been flicked on, and someone was making some puzzling sounds.

He strained his ears.

The sounds were not very loud. Even the most pronounced of them was nothing more than a soft vibration of a varying frequency. It was obviously coming from a uman throat, but there was something in-uman about it. The uman was not talking. It was more of a reedy crooning, and the very senselessness of it held him in a growing, pleasurable curiosity.

Beneath the low crooning was another strange sound, a stroking sound, as of repeated working of some fibrous material.

Very quietly he put his bottle on the floor and tiptoed toward the corner of the cell wall.

He peered around the edge, and his eyes grew wide.

The uman on the other side was considerably below the normal height, and in other ways was misshapen. The shoulders were narrow and sloping, the hips curved and unusually wide. The uman's back was toward him, and he was unable to guess whether a ventral view would show further abnormalities.

But the queerest deformity of all was the yellow fibrous growth that tumbled from the uman's head about the shoulders; it was this growth — something resembling if not identical to his own hair — that the uman was working on with a strange multi-toothed instrument, apparently trying to induce a substantially longitudinally-parallel structure in it.

For a long moment he stared, frozen, eyes unblinking.

When he finally took a breath, it was more like a whistling gasp, and he jerked back, fearful that he had betrayed himself.

But the sounds continued, so he peeked around again. Apparently the uman was temporarily oblivious to interruption.

He then observed that a portion of the metal bulkhead had been polished to a mirror-like finish, and that the uman was studying the mirror. The toothed instrument for the hair was laid aside, and the strange one seemed to be making a fairly critical examination of face and arms.

Those arms, which were bare from the elbow down, were queerly soft and curved; they were not the long, steel-muscled arms of a normal uman.

Lurain swallowed uneasily. The ethanol was having an unusually rapid effect on him; his tunic was growing damp with perspiration.

He ought to leave, but he couldn't.

Had some compulsion within the mind and heart of that misshapen uman driven him from bustling wardrooms and corridors into this retreat? Not likely. The normal uman thought nothing of being cooped up in close, body-brushing confinement with thousands of other umen for the months or even years of flight from battle to battle, from planet to distant planet.

Was it possible, then, that there was at least one other like him? Highly improbable. And yet . . .

As he pondered, the strange uman began fumbling at the shoulder straps that supported his tunic.

Lurain turned and tiptoed quickly down the cell aisle and out of the room.

A few minutes later he was picking his way along a corridor choked with semi-dismantled tiers of endless hexagonal birth cells. He was still breathing rapidly and wondering why he had run away, when he suddenly recalled where he had seen the strange uman before. The unknown one must have been the Superintendent of the Cells, and of course would have had every right to be in the cell room.

But how curious, he thought, that the one responsible for the growth of half-a-million tiny ova into perfect infant umen should prove to be so imperfect, so warped and misshapen. And yet, deformities notwithstanding, the Superintendent had carried out those responsibilities to the letter. For, if he recalled correctly, six months out from Terraport the cells had duly disgorged their squirming three-kilogram cargoes — all alive — to become, eventually, the first colonist-soldiers for a hundred conquered Magellanic planets. But wait — that must have been when the cells were under the care of a different Superintendent, dead these twenty years. The present Superintendent would have been a child at the time, like Lurain himself.

Well, the possible incompetence of the Superintendent of the Cells no longer mattered. Nothing mattered.

A sudden clatter in the corridor ahead shattered his reverie, and he nearly collided with a crew of workmen hauling a coaxial cable assembly. He stood aside and watched bitterly as the straining umen stuffed the cables into the control cradles along the walls.

To be aboard while his beloved, battle-scarred ship was being converted into an experimental Temple lab was almost more than he could bear. And

the conversion was all so foolish. He'd seen the work-prints that Anthon, the Temple Proctor, had brought aboard at Procyon IV last week, and he had laughed openly, even as he'd handed them over to Lieutenant Hykane for execution. So the Temple thought the D-13 could be run by a crew of two!

He knew from long experience that the revised control system nearing completion could hardly be understood, much less operated, by fewer than a dozen highly trained and closely integrated umen of the staff officer level. In fact, he had been amazed that a uman engineer could have conceived of the simplified system at all. It wasn't like them. Within narrow confines of thought and conduct they were incomparable. But when called on to comprehend the essence of a highly complex operation or to make a many-faceted decision, the uman mind tended to degenerate into an indecisive body-dulling inertness.

There he went again! *They. Them.* As though he himself hadn't been a foetus in a birth cell like the billions of billions of other umen.

He growled at the conversion crew under his breath and was about to pass on, when he noticed a white-gowned figure striding down the corridor toward him. It was Anthon, the Temple Proctor.

He regarded the heavy, placid features sourly, and bluntly declared the thought that was still in his mind.

"Not one two-uman crew in a billion could run this ship."

Anthon smiled grimly. "But you could run her by yourself, I presume."

"Now that you mention it, I think I could."

"And what one uman can do, my brother, two can do better."

Lurain shrugged his shoulders. "You hope." He continued curiously, "Just what is the real story behind this rush conversion job?"

"Really, Captain Lurain, you know as much as I. Beyond the fact that it's to become an experimental vessel under direct supervision of the Temple, I know nothing."

"Oh, sure. But why provision it completely before it even reaches Terra-port? And why this mystery about a two-uman crew?"

"Temple orders — from The Undrud himself. I never question The Undrud. I advise you not to, either."

"I shan't," snapped Lurain. He shared the general mingled fear, awe, and respect for The Undrud, the great, never-seen symbol at the pinnacle

of the Temple hierarchy, who was said to care personally for the inconceivably precious vitaplasma whence all women had sprung, and which bore the ova for all women to come.

He turned and stamped out his frustration down the corridor leading to his cabin.

As he closed the cabin door behind him he wondered if the leaping pulses in his throat were noticeable, and with them the most inhuman flush spreading up around his cheekbones. But when he spoke, his usually resonant voice was very quiet.

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting to talk to you."

"You are the Cell Superintendent, I believe?"

"Marin, Cell Superintendent."

"This is remarkably informal. Why didn't you ask for an appointment? And why not see Lieutenant Hykane?"

"There's no more time. Besides, the matter concerns only us."

"Be explicit."

"You ran away."

There was no suggestion of impertinence in the statement. And it was not really a statement, but an accusation.

Lurain walked around his visitor and sat down at his desk. He found himself swallowing dryly. "Continue."

The other's cool confidence seemed to dwindle. The reply was hesitant, low-pitched: "I am an aberrant."

"I suspected it. I presume you saw me leave the birth room, and are here to ask that I not turn you over to the Temple for dissection, as required by law. Your secret is safe."

The other's eyes narrowed. "I didn't come here for that. Is it possible you haven't guessed the nature of my aberration?"

"I know nothing about you."

He was consumed by curiosity, but waited silently as his unbidden guest seemed to come to a vital decision.

The smaller figure seemed to grow in stature, to stand a little straighter. "I am a female aberrant — and probably fertile."

"Impossible! All women are pseudo-male, and sterile."

The other grew perceptibly paler. "I am telling the truth."

Lurain gazed at the creature with mingled horror and disgust. What monstrous gene defect in the vitaplasm had produced this . . . this *animal*, this atavistic echo of a forgotten, primordial day when even the highest species were reproduced in the bodies of the females?

And how was it possible that . . . *she* . . . could stand there with such stiff calm, as though proud of her primitiveness?

"When did you discover that you were a" — he wanted to say *monster* — "a *female*?"

She replied in frozen quiet. "It was a gradual discovery. But since about my fourteenth cell-date, I think, I have been certain."

He studied her with squeamish scepticism. "I don't see how you've kept your secret so long. Physical examinations recorded in your personal dossier must have shown —"

"— exactly what I wanted them to show." She returned his gaze levelly. "I, too, am a skilled forger."

He remembered the tangled trail of altered orders, falsified promotions, and ruthless back-stabbing that had finally put him in command of his ship, and he twisted uncomfortably. "But surely, in all these years, some one must have found you out. What about the ship's physicians? Didn't they know?"

"Only one of them, the Prime in charge of my sector. On my fourteenth cell date he pronounced my aberration incurable, and said he'd have to deliver me to The Undrud for dissection if the D-13 ever returned to Terra."

"Well . . .?"

"He . . . died."

Lurain repressed a shiver. Finally he said: "I don't know why you are telling me this. I'll abide by my promise of confidence. But I'd like to ask one question. You've known for fifteen years you were a monster. How could you endure to live, knowing this? Why haven't you had yourself destroyed?"

"Why haven't *you*?"

For a long time he stared at her stupidly, waiting for her reply to sink into his consciousness, and there to keep sinking until it might encounter something that would give it meaning.

He was never able to remember clearly what happened after that, except

that he had shouted for the guards, ordered the thing carried from the room, and howled something about confinement pending summary execution.

During the bewildered sullenness of the next few hours he drank steadily, and his discomfort, both mental and physical, grew steadily more acute.

And ever his proud and stately ship spiraled inward to Earth.

Terraport would be in darkside now, and her great lights would be fused into a single tiny eye winking mockery at him — if he chose to slide back his porthole screen.

But he wouldn't look.

Twice he reached for the intercom, half inclined to rescind his execution order and to turn that creature over to Anthon and the Temple, where she belonged. And twice he had remembered her reply in time.

He, a monster?

Unthinkable.

Different, yes.

A monster, a degraded *animal* — no.

Then why had he reacted so violently to the implications of her answer? Just as if he were punishing her for exposing a ghastly fact.

In a matter of hours she'd be dead; that would solve everything — except why she had thought him to be a creature like herself.

He'd like to know what had given her such an idea.

Unsteadily he arose from his desk and walked toward his cabin door.

Ten minutes later the prison-keeper let him into her cubicle.

She must have heard him come in, but she gave no sign of it.

She lay on her back on the cot, her fingers interlaced behind that mass of yellow hair, her somber brown eyes drifting through the grey-steel ceiling.

He asked thickly: "What do you know about me?"

The creature turned her head toward him in a slow graceful gesture. He got an impression of restrained curiosity now untinged by fear.

She said: "I discovered you in the storage room, months ago."

"What!"

"You went there often to drink your disgusting ethanol." Her nose wrinkled.

Lurain leaned heavily against the cell door.

"When you aren't drinking," she continued calmly, "you have a wonderful smell. Rather like that of the male *ago*, not entirely clean, but fascinating. Your perspiratory system excretes a male hormone."

She smiled at him as though secretly amused by some sudden thought. "And I've seen beneath your visor. No uman has hair, you know."

His knees were turning to jelly. He was going to collapse.

There was no choice; he stumbled over to the cot and sat down in a heap.

She drew up her legs to make room for him. "I went there the first time to get away, to be by myself, to think, to wonder. Then once you came in when I was already there; I watched you. And I kept watching you, for months, years. Even from the start you attracted me enormously, and when I concluded you were a male aberrant, I finally decided to reveal myself to you, at first in the birth room and then in your cabin. I assumed, unfortunately, that you were fully aware of the nature of your own aberration. In this I was rash. It may be years before you accept and become reconciled to your identity. I'll be of no use to you then, because tomorrow I'll be dead."

"Who . . . what . . ." he stammered, "do you think we are?"

"Who knows? The sexless umen are so unthinkable beyond us in the evolutionary scale that it is difficult to imagine ourselves even as atavisms — throwbacks to some remote, bisexual proto-uman ancestry. Let's face the knowable facts: we're nothing but animals, making a pretense at being umen."

"Animals? Pretense at umen?" His head whirled.

Her cool tones mocked him. "Yes, animals. The male fertilizes the female. The egg grows within her body."

He discovered then that he still clutched the bottle of ethanol. He lifted the flask to eye level and peered at it in bleared wonder. "I'm a fertile *ago*." He took another drink, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand, and tried to focus his eyes on the female.

"You're" — she sought grimly for an adjective but found none — "— you've drunk too much. It's affected your motor nervous system. Maybe you're still going to execute me; maybe you'll decide something else. But you've got to have a clear head to do whatever you do. Stop drinking!"

But he resisted when she sat up and tried to take the bottle away. Some-

how it got thrown to the floor, where it shattered in an acrid spray.

And Lurain suddenly found that his arms were trying to encircle the body of the silently struggling prisoner.

His fogged brain was more puzzled than angry when Marin doubled her legs up against his abdomen and kicked him against the cubicle door.

"Not this way, my friend," she panted.

He lifted his shoulders in a puzzled gesture and called for the guard to let him out.

As the prison door clanged shut behind him, he knew that he must do *something*, must give voice to a finally-irresistible inner urge, not yet crystallized, but rapidly coming into focus.

He was almost happy as he weaved up the corridor toward the officers' cabins. From time to time he had to touch the passage walls for balance, and considered briefly whether he should have Hykane reprimand the jet engineer. But as he thought of Hykane he forgot the way the ship seemed to be rolling, and a moment later he burst into the Lieutenant's cabin.

The amazed officer dropped his astrogator parallels and sprang to his feet.

Lurain clutched at the table. "What are you staring at, you stupid, sterile spawn of a witless amoeba!"

"Nothing, sir! Are you well, sir?"

"I feel wonderful! I'm a male *ago*!"

The door opened behind him, and he whirled to face the newcomer. "Ahah! Our splendid representative of The Undrud! The vitaplasm must have burst its test tube when it formed the magnificent microbe that became our inimitable Anthon, thief of battleships!"

The Proctor exchanged startled glances with Hykane.

Lurain reeled again. "I'll cashier that jet engineer!" He reached for the intercom; it slipped through his fingers and crashed to the floor. In stooping for it, he caught sight of a new group of startled officers at the doorway. "You futile, overgrown orphans! How can you stand up when the ship is spin—"

Then something black blotted out everything, and he felt himself falling.

"The two of you" — Anthon made no effort to conceal his cool, speculative distaste — "are living insults to the Plasm. You know the law. The Undrud personally dissects aberrants."

Lurain did not consciously hear what the Proctor was saying. His elbows rested on the cold metal of the interrogation table, and his manacled hands cupped his chin.

When they had first brought her in and sat her down opposite him, his shame and remorse had been almost more than he could bear. But as the minutes passed, while they waited for Anthon, he had stolen a covert glance at her face, and thereafter his eyes had never left hers. Even from the beginning there had been no reproach in those eyes — only a grave compassion.

Anthon cleared his throat irritably. "I shall deal with you separately if you don't pay attention."

Lurain closed his eyes wearily. "We're listening."

"The Undrud need never see you."

"Come to the point."

"Coöperate with me, and you'll be in no danger whatever. I am in a position to do you a great service. When we reach the Temple, each of you will undergo a simple, almost painless operation. After that, you will be as other umen — sexless and safe."

Marin said curtly: "I shall not voluntarily submit to sterilization."

"You really have no choice — unless you try to escape," said Anthon.

"Escape?" Lurain lifted his imprisoning eyelids a fraction of an inch and looked at the uman.

"I mention it merely to discourage you. You will be delivered into the custody of the Temple by a naval guard from this ship. You ought to know they shoot to kill when a prisoner escapes — or tries to. But suppose you eluded your guards — you'd be captured within the hour by Temple corpsmen with stun-guns. You'd wake up in The Undrud's vivisection rooms."

Lurain sensed that his companion was shuddering. He wet his lips uneasily. He wanted to strike out blindly at the inexorable net that was settling about her, the net whose first steel meshes his own blundering idiocy had created. But there was nothing he could touch. His helplessness was almost infantile.

Anthon continued: "It should be evident that my offer is wholly generous. Accompany your guards quietly, and live. Try to escape, and you will, if you are very fortunate, die quickly."

"Your superficially generous proposal is brimming with fascinating in-

consistencies," said Lurain quietly. "Under the law, examination of aberrants is conducted by The Undrud personally. But you, a mere Proctor, are making altruistic if emphatic efforts to impress on us the desirability of arriving alive at *your* laboratories — ostensibly that we may be secretly sterilized and become as other umen, and be safe ever after. You're a thrice-cursed liar, Anthon. Just what intra-Temple treachery is this?"

The Proctor smiled slowly. "Sterilization is only an incidental consequence of the operation, as you've surmised. Beyond that you know nothing. Neither of you has any conception of your value to the future of the race — and the future of the lowly Proctor who discovered you."

Marin returned the smile without humor. "Perhaps I know more than you imagine. I know that the sacred vitaplasm is a mass of unstable ova, even more unstable than animal ova. And I know that an individual animal ovum can easily be fertilized *in vitro* by pricking the egg surface with a tiny needle, by subjecting it to certain saline solutions, or even by vigorous shaking. And ova taken from the sacred plasm are even more easily fertilized. A small change of temperature — of composition or concentration of nutrient medium — the smallest physical or chemical shock — *any* of that is sufficient to fertilize the ovum mass and initiate foetal growth."

Lurain nodded in growing comprehension. So the plasm ova were so unstable that the bare acceleration of space travel started them on their way to becoming umen! He smiled grimly at Anthon. "The trip from Terra to the farthest sun in the galaxy takes a little over fifteen years. Not too long. Ship-born youngsters still have sixty years of life ahead of them. But the extra-galactic nebulae are not quite so accessible. A battle fleet sent to Andromeda, even if eventually crewed by umen born en route, would hold only frozen senile corpses when and if it should arrive some two hundred years later. Until you discover suspended animation for a ship's crew or a faster space ship, your only hope of transgalactic conquest lies in developing a stable ovum — one that can't be fertilized by movement or shock, but only by specific agents. I begin to see why our bodies are so important. On to Andromeda, eh?"

"Andromeda? Fah!" Anthon's eyes were burning, and from the left corner of his mouth a fleck of foam appeared. "Within my lifetime I shall see millions of colonizing fleets bear stable plasm into every sterad of space — fleets that can be re-crewed for thousands, even millions of years, from

the precious seed they carry. I, Anthon, give my people not one galaxy, but the universe! I, *Anthon!*"

Lurain bent forward in rapt fascination — not at the scope of the Proctor's project (*that* was merely the inevitable conclusion of any syllogism that predicated stable ova), but at the submerged laminae of hate and frustrated ambition. The Undrud evidently ruled the Temple with an iron hand, but one which would soon be shattered by a hierarchic coup unprecedented in uman history.

"You've attempted a unilateral assurance of our coöperation in terms of dying and not-dying," said Lurain, studying Marin thoughtfully. "Our choice is almost forced. Therefore, subject to Marin's assent, I think we can promise you our fullest assistance, in exchange for one additional concession."

"And that is?"

Marin interrupted. "Lurain wishes to suggest that, since we are animals, let us mate as animals, and bear our young. After that, make your operations. We would ask only that we not be separated from our little one."

"Certainly not. Such reproduction would be time-consuming and of no racial value."

Lurain looked out at the Proctor from behind slitted eyelids. "Your refusal has odd connotations. You said *reproduction*. So you think we were born of animals like ourselves?"

"It is barely possible."

"But *that*," interposed Marin wide-eyed, "would mean we were —"

"*Men*," finished Lurain curtly. "The second syllable of *umen*."

"But highly implausible," said Anthon. "That rare species of animal has been extinct for nearly ninety thousand years. Furthermore, it's generally assumed they were marsupials, whereas Marin is obviously a mammarian."

Lurain rubbed his chin in abstracted silence. True, nearly all of the few extant artifacts and skeletal fragments of man had been discovered in the hinterland of Great Island in Terra's southern sea, where all the other extinct fauna were demonstrably pouch-bearing. Some umen paleontologists nevertheless insisted that this mysterious and intelligent animal had passed beyond marsupial reproduction before the time of his extinction. But no one really knew anything about men, or the manner of their passing, any more than anyone knew how or why very soon thereafter the first

umen had appeared. Attempts to relate the two events had finally come to rest as nothing more than an entertaining myth in juvenile instructotapes. Any explanation of uman origins had to start with the enigma of vitaplasm. Even if its first ovum had sprung into abiogenetic being in some shallow stagnant forest pond saturated with an improbable concentration of the right mineral salts and complex amino acids, and even if that same stinking fluid had nurtured the consequent umen foeti, and even if, when the first infant umen had burst their placental sacs, men had been on hand to save them from drowning and to feed them during their first year, when they were completely helpless — yes, even if one could compound improbability on improbability to explain the coming of umen, one couldn't explain the passing of man. He had been here. And then, suddenly, he wasn't.

Lurain looked up to find a courier saluting Anthon from the open doorway.

"Sir, Acting-Captain Hykane extends his compliments to the Proctor and forwards this message."

Anthon tore open the folder, read the enclosed slip swiftly, then frowned and slowly put it on the table. His voice was very thoughtful, and carried a perceptible uncertainty. "News of you has spread fast. A little too fast. Just five minutes ago The Undrud radioed the captain of the D-13 that one Lurain and one Marin, suspected aberrants, were to be turned over to Temple corpsmen immediately on docking."

He picked the paper up and stuffed it in his tunic. "Courier, you will tell Captain Hykane that I shall attend to the matter."

The uman bowed again and left.

Anthon smiled grimly. "You can see that I haven't exaggerated Temple interest in you. But the operation still goes through as scheduled — and in *my* lab. The Undrud will receive nothing — except a message that you were killed while attempting to escape. Its truth depends on you." He clapped his hands for the guard.

It seemed that the lock of the prison door had hardly clicked shut behind him when a muffled metallic million-toned rumble beat its way up from the bowels of the ship.

His cell began to lurch violently, and he held to the cot edge with both hands.

It was over.

The D-13 sat in a cradle at Terraport.

From faraway, great jets sputtered and dampered to zero.

With mounting unbelief he listened to the silence gather.

During two decades the song of those jets had gradually become integral with his mind and flesh, and by now was almost as essential as the air he breathed. Or perhaps more so. For with the paralyzing silence came the illusion of vacuum. He fought to get air into his lungs.

At that instant the stillness was simultaneously magnified and shattered by a strangling gasp from beyond his cell wall.

So *she* had felt it, too.

He realized then that the deeps of space were essential to the chemistry of their aberrant minds, and that any prolonged planetary sojourn must destroy them both.

But now Terra held them, ship and all, in her own larger gravitational prison, and her invisible claw was reaching up through the vitals of the helpless vessel, seeking him out.

He got jerkily to his feet and passed his hand over his face. Not until this moment had he really felt caged. Perhaps the feeling would ease when they were led outside, where he could see the horizons and skies.

He beat at the inner recesses of his mind, reaching backward across the years in an attempt to recall the skyline of Terraport. A land transport had carried him, along with numerous other cadet apprentices, from somewhere . . . along something high . . . to the jetport, where they had all initially been put aboard a sister ship of the D-13. That something high would be — a great bridge. And that meant a river, far below.

These fragments in the womb of time were mending, stirring, and trying to emerge as a plan . . . Yes, he remembered staring far off down the great river toward the bordering meadows, and beyond, toward hills cut by ribboning streams.

What he would do next would depend on Marin.

He stopped at the barred door and listened. The guards were at the far end of the corridor. Still, he hesitated to call out to her.

It was not too difficult for him to walk into certain suicide. Inviting *her* was something else.

"Lurain?"

He whirled and whispered eagerly, "Yes?"

"Lurain . . ." The voice was now muffled, unsure. "Is there no escape?"

He replied uneasily. "We might break free for a little while."

"What then?"

"It would be as Anthon said. After escaping, we could only hope to evade the Temple riflemen until the naval guards could rediscover and kill us."

She hesitated. "How long do you think we'd have together before they . . . before the guards . . ."

He sucked in his breath. What was she saying? His heart was pounding so loudly he could hardly hear his own eager whisper: "An hour, perhaps. Marin, little Marin . . . let us take that hour!"

She said quietly: "Yes."

It seemed to him that her voice, for all its apparent soberness, was suddenly and turbulently alive, almost gay. How strange, he thought, how sadly strange, that of all the hearts in the galaxy, hers with its numbered beats was the happiest.

He said: "I am no match for a uman guard if it comes to gunplay. We must avoid any such contest. Our only chance is to force a situation on them for which they have no conditioned response. It will come when the prison cab carries us across the bridge. Can you swim?"

"No. Does that ruin your plan?"

"Not necessarily. The guards can't swim, either. The dolts are taught only to shoot . . . But above all, you must remember this, when we're in the water, just turn on your back and relax. You won't drown. I'll be pulling you along by the chin. If you clutch at me I'll have to knock you unconscious. Will you remember that?"

"Yes."

"Then listen very carefully. We'll be put in the back seat of the guard cab. When it reaches mid-bridge —"

The cab doors shut behind them; the machine purred a moment, then began to roll smoothly up the ramp leading to the port side of the great bridge.

Neither he nor Marin had been bound; as slow-moving aberrants they represented no danger to the guards who sat between and on either side of them on the rear seat.

The taste of brass was in his mouth as Lurain watched the balustered rails of the incline race past. He rubbed the palms of his hands over the rough prison garb they had given him and shrank back into the hard cushions of his seat. He knew that Marin was watching him furtively from the corner of her eye. An eye which, because of him, would soon be a dubious indentation in her charred and sodden head.

He shivered and wet his lips nervously.

The cab rolled over the crest of the ramp and on to the bridge, and near enough to the edge for them to see the broad river below, hideously blue in its reflection of lost freedom. Hurriedly he turned his eyes away, to the opposite side of the bridge, and beyond. But there was no escape there, either. With fixed and fatalistic gaze he followed the insidious ribbon as it wound through a beckoning green world of interlocking meadows and forests, pausing seductively here and there to pick up a brook or two.

He closed his eyes tightly and huddled farther back between the burly bulk of the guards.

By the cell that bore him — what to do? What to do?

In the seat just ahead the driver glanced at him curiously through the rear view mirror. The cab was still gathering speed, and they were two thirds across the great arch of the bridge.

"Lurain?" whispered Marin.

He moaned miserably. In his lifetime he had been responsible for tens of thousands of deaths — uman and Magellanic, and had never bothered to think whether it was necessary or not. For the first time he was absolutely sure that he *should* kill two beings — was ethically *bound* to kill, and he could not kill.

"Silence!" ordered the center guard. "You must —"

It must have been those two words — *you must* — acid flung on his raw-nerved despair, that wrung the horrid animal cry from his throat.

The eternity of the next split second was a curious blend of raveled motion and static, almost leisurely immobile stereoptic pictures.

And in the last of these frozen moments he and the driver and two guards were struggling over the steering wheel, with Marin and the other two guards suspended in space just outside the open cab doors. Half a dozen functionally carved balusters from the bridge railing were apparently hung in mid-air just outside the front cab window, and the bridge roadway

loomed large above and behind him, staring a startled farewell from the jagged eye of its shattered balustrade.

From that moment to the next, when he was clutching his wild-eyed beloved by the hair and treading water, he could remember nothing.

The bubbling froth of the vanished cab and its four prisoners was still gurgling insanely at him when he shifted his grasp to Marin's chin and struck out down stream toward a tiny wooded cape thrusting into the river.

From time to time he stole a glance at the white silent face of the creature he was destroying, and marveled that his veins pounded with no remorse, but rather with an icy exhilaration.

A quarter of an hour later he swam into the mouth of a contributory brook that split the forest from the meadow; his searching toes found the gravelly bottom. He carried her ashore and set her on her feet.

For a long time, it seemed, they did nothing but breathe deeply and stare unspeaking into the eyes of the other. Somewhere in their flight they had lost their visors and sandals, and Marin's hair was a wet golden mass on the shoulder straps of her wet-clinging tunic.

He understood that her eyes were asking a question she could not say aloud: Are you sorry?

He pondered this thing in gentle amazement. Sorry? He, who as a battle-man had been condemned to death at the moment his ovum had been indexed and put in its birth cell? He, who twenty times in twenty years had continued to live when he should have been killed? Surely, now that the generous gods were tendering him their chalice of this marvelous hour, he should not complain of dark dregs.

Silently he reached out his hand. His mate came passively into his arms.

Later they lay side by side in the cool ferns, gazing through the leaves at the blueness of the forever-lost skies, each submerged in the fullness of his own thoughts and lulled by the monody of the brook.

"So now," mused Marin, "I am complete. If I were to live . . . I wonder . . ." She sought for words. "Would our child be as you, or as I?"

"A very small Marin, with eyes like twin stars."

They were silent again. The moments raced by like heartbeats. Time must be growing short.

Then her fingers found his hand. They were trembling.

The dreaded moment was upon them. It distressed him unbearably that he did not know how to make it easier for her. He sighed in profound sadness.

She said in flat dry tones: "That hill ahead . . ."

"I know. They've been there several minutes. It will be instantaneous. You will feel nothing —"

She rolled over and hid her face against his chest, as though it was within his power to save her, if he but willed it.

Lurain groaned softly and put his free arm over her side. Her whole body was shaking.

Her scream died in her throat.

And even as the light in his own brain faded, he knew that they had not been killed — just stunned. Naval guards had not fired that gun. Someone wanted them alive. His last thought, too brief for horror, was simply of a title: "The Undrud."

Through the fog of returning consciousness drifted the whisper of harsh voices, scuffling chairs, and the clank of metal. But the most remarkable thing of all was not a sound, but an odor, pleasant, strangely fragrant, entirely remarkable — and completely elusive.

His eyes fluttered open.

He was sitting, miraculously upright, on a bench next to Marin, looking past the pallid thin-lipped face of Anthon, past a dozen temple guards, into steel eyes that scintillated grim satisfaction as they flashed from Marin, to him, and back again.

The Undrud.

He looked quickly at Marin. Her face was held high, but it was completely bloodless. The edges of her nostrils showed flecks of green. She was breathing very rapidly.

He was toying with the numb hope that she might die of fright. And then The Undrud spoke, and he looked up again.

The supreme uman appeared to be in his late sixties, and the hard-hewn lines of his face showed the prolonged indent of colossal responsibilities.

And yet, when now he addressed Anthon, his voice, while curt and forbidding, carried a curious resonance, an odd timbre.

"Can you identify these as the two fertile aberrants who escaped the military police?"

"Yes, sire."

Anthon was plainly uneasy.

"It was inexcusably careless of you to let such valuable specimens escape. If I hadn't detailed my own corpsmen along the route in anticipation of just such a move, they might have been killed by those fool naval police."

The Proctor bowed in venomous but nervous apology. "It will not happen again, sire. Shall I have them removed to the dissection laboratories?"

"You will await my pleasure, Proctor," said The Undrud coldly. "I shall outline my dissection program in due time, and it shall be conducted without further blunders by my associates or the interference of possible confederates of the prisoners."

Anthon bowed again and shot a warning glance to Lurain which said clearly: "Betray me and you'll regret it."

The battleman was instantly alert to the overtones of a clash of bitterly antagonistic wills. It was suddenly clear how much Anthon hated his great superior, how desperately he wanted to be the first to develop a stable ovum strain. If there were only some way to play one of his enemies off against the other! But as he studied that glacial enigmatic face he saw there only the crystal image of certain death.

"Possible confederates?" The Proctor's curiosity pierced his thin veil of hate-fear.

The Undrud measured him with impatient contempt. "Have you no eyes? These creatures aren't aberrants. They are living fossils — *men* — a man and a woman. I've already traced their birth registrations — rank forgeries. In your haste you've completely overlooked the fact that they had parents, and that those parents had parents. That in fact an indefinite number of men like them may lie hidden about us, waiting for the right moment to attempt a rescue. By the gods, what dolts I have for assistants!"

As Lurain watched a pink flush climb into the Proctor's face, his mind began to race insanely, around and around, and always the same idea came up.

The Undrud *must* be right. At some unknown time and place he and Marin had been born of living parents. Where were they now? *Where?* He considered the problem rapidly. His rise to captain of a great warship was

evidence of some indefinable superiority to the umen. But for that unfortunate incident with ethanol there would have been no limits to his rise in the world of umen. If he had chosen, he might eventually have become the Leader of the Armed Forces. Were the others like him ensconced in positions safe from suspicion or scrutiny?

"Does The Undrud seriously believe," asked Anthon, "that there are other men hidden among us?"

"It is quite probable," replied The Undrud curtly. "These two creatures here before us reached high official positions through fraud and cunning, and it was only by the sheerest accident that we unmasked them. Until we know otherwise, we must assume that others like them do in fact exist, and may attempt to aid them as soon as their presence is officially learned. If I hadn't personally picked my guards and proctors, I would be suspicious of everyone standing in this room. All my life I have dreamed of catching a pair of fertile fossil men, and now that the opportunity has materialized I shall run no risk of interference or rescue. I had exactly this situation in mind when I ordered the D-13 redesigned as a space laboratory. We may not hope for a repetition of such blind good fortune in several millenia, so we can take no risk whatever."

Lurain sighed. Well, that cleared up the mystery of his converted ship. They had brought each other through eighteen battles, but in the end neither could save the other. There was just the faintest, ironic satisfaction in knowing that at least the shell of his beloved D-13 would be about him when he died. He wondered if Marin could understand this, or whether he alone in the galaxy could feel that way about a ship.

"But sire," protested Anthon, "there are no other known aberrants in existence. Surely you don't believe—"

"You're forgetting the D-12," clipped The Undrud.

Lurain's fevered intelligence soared. *The D-12!* That was the ill-fated sister ship of his own D-13, from which both he and (as he now knew) Marin had been transferred on the eve of its departure. Another missing piece in the puzzle! If he juggled the pieces enough, perhaps they would fall into a sensible pattern. He strained to hear Anthon's slow and uneasy reply.

"I admit that your long-standing theory of the destruction of the D-12 is not inconsistent with what little is really known. But I still prefer the

official explanation — engine trouble leading to the explosion that atomized the entire ship."

His superior smiled grimly. "That's wishful thinking, as fallacious as it is effortless."

Heart pounding, Lurain leaned forward.

The Proctor replied: "But, sire, if your hypothesis were true, if some three hundred mutineering *men* really attempted to seize the D-12, and failing, blew up the ship, you must admit that their number was small, that to reduce their risk, they would surely have taken every known man and woman in the galaxy with them. Even if these two aberrants here had parents, they undoubtedly perished aboard the D-12. So, when the prisoners were unexpectedly transferred at the last moment to the D-13, they were cut off forever from any hope of aid from their own kind."

Lurain's heart sank. The Proctor, despite his superficial ineptness, was right this time. With a despairing sense of fulfillment, he thought briefly of that distant, time-lost flash in the heavens. If he had only known, if they had only told him in time, he would have dodged that off-schedule transfer and died with them. Probably they had thought him too young to be trusted with such a dread secret.

The Undrud's voice was cold. "Again you overlook a vital point. We must assume that the prospective mutineers checked their roll carefully before blasting off from Terra. They must have known that two of their young, for reasons at the moment unknown, were not sailing with them."

Anthor looked blank. "I don't follow."

"Think!"

The Proctor's frown deepened, then cleared. "Sire," he said incredulously, "are you suggesting that even one aberrant, hypothetical or otherwise, would pass up the chance to escape to another galaxy in order to stay behind and recover two worthless man-young?"

Lurain was breathing rapidly again. It was hopeless; everything was still vague, conjectural, shot through with hazy, improbable speculation. But — he thought of the life that might even now be growing within the body of his mate. How would he feel toward that life? What danger and sacrifice would he hazard to protect it? In that self-answering question, he knew, lay the fate of Marin and himself. And with a gasp that forced strangely scented air into the deepest recesses of his lungs and simultaneously cleared

his fogged brain, he knew that answer. If he and Marin in fact had been missed on the D-12 before its ill-starred flight, some one *had* stayed behind to search for them.

Some one, somewhere . . . was *watching*.

In the face of The Undrud's continued silence, Anthon began to look uneasy, doubtful. Finally, even the guards seemed to catch the contagion of some unknown, menacing personality. They pressed in closer on the prisoners. The officer next to Lurain fingered his pistol nervously.

The only sound in the room came from Marin. Her eyes had never left the face of The Undrud, and she continually, and apparently unconsciously, sniffed at the perturbing odor that pervaded the room.

Lurain's mind raced on.

The Watcher must have known that he and Marin had returned to Terra on the D-13. Yet, so far, the waiting Unknown had got no message to them: which meant either that he couldn't — or that he was so sure of himself, so high in government circles, that he could snatch them from under the nose of The Undrud himself.

No mean feat, for those cold grey eyes windowed a brain that was capable at once of redesigning a battleship and controlling the vast organization behind the vitaplast. A brain intelligent enough to divine his biological identity almost before the D-13 docked, and intuitive enough to anticipate his suicidal flight with Marin. A brain probably without peer in the galaxy, not excepting even that of the Watcher.

Undrud versus Watcher.

The solution must be here, in this room, if he could only see it. Think . . . *think!*

He became suddenly aware that Marin was breathing in sibilant jerks, that her dark frightened eyes were blazing at him, as though trying to warn him . . . of what? With irritated impatience he shook off that desperate gaze, and —

He had it.

The colossal, mind-warping Answer.

Eyes glazing, he stared at The Undrud. His jaw dropped slowly, and his stunned lips parted, unable to contain their terrific secret:

"You."

In the stuporous eternity that followed, he found himself locked in the

same paralytic mold with Anthon and the guards. With a strange objectivity he watched the face of The Undrud become as bloodless as his own.

Lurain shuddered and closed his eyes, as if to shut out the enormity of the thing he had done.

Numbly he listened to Anthon's confirming gasp. "You!"

And then he heard a moan of inexpressible anguish, and he opened astounded eyes to see Marin enfolded in the arms of The Undrud. The Undrud's cap was knocked to the floor, exposing a high, broad skull crowned by white-streaked hair, and he was whispering huskily into her ear.

"My child . . . oh, my darling little girl . . ."

The battleman tried to swallow, but his tongue seemed glued to the roof of his mouth. With the luminous insight that horror brings, he divined the essence of this man, the father of his mate, waiting, choosing to remain behind on the planet he hated, living with the knowledge that his own mate and all of his companions were dead; existing from one battle report of the charmed D-13 to the next, and finally bending his every thought to this scheme to get his now inconceivably precious cargo into an escape ship.

And now this.

Two spots of flaming red marked the Proctor's high cheekbones, in curious contrast to the mottled white that edged his rhythmically flaring nostrils. But his voice was initially restrained, ominously soft. "It will be a very curious thing to see The Undrud stretched out on one of his own dissecting boards, between his two intended specimens." He burst out harshly: "So *this* was why you forbade dissection of aberrants to all but yourself! You wanted to protect any of your own kind that might turn up. I'll wager you've never lifted a scalpel to an aberrant in your whole life."

But The Undrud ignored them all; his grave eyes looked down compassionately at the tear-streaked face of his daughter. "You remembered the odor of tobacco smoke, didn't you? If you could only know how my heart leapt when I saw that you were going to remember everything, and recognize me. What could possibly remain to me to want after that? Do not grieve, my child, nor let Lurain reproach himself afterwards."

"You talk," choked Marin, "as though you were going to die, but Lurain and I weren't."

"I think that may be true," said the grey-haired man gently. "The D-13 will have to be satisfied with a two-man crew."

"What fatuous foolishness is this?" demanded Anthon. "Seize him!"

"Don't move!" warned The Undrud.

The guards hesitated. The officer looked nervously from The Undrud to Anthon.

"When I die," continued The Undrud evenly, "the uman race dies with me."

Anthon restrained the guard with a look. "What do you mean?"

"This: the name of your current Undrud is Frank — Frank Underwood 989 — lineal descendant of the first Frank Underwood who was born some ninety thousand years ago." He smiled humorlessly. "Or don't you grasp the significance of this bit of pre-uman history? Would you care to hear more?"

Anthon licked his lips uneasily. "This digression can avail you nothing in the end. And don't try to make me think you can harm the vitaplast, because it is closely guarded half a mile beneath us. But go on."

"Then listen carefully. Ninety thousand years ago this planet was populated by men, and for two generations they tried to beat off invaders from Procyon. But by the third generation, war and radiation had so decimated them that they were on the verge of surrender. And then the first Underwood discovered how to make a human ovum proliferate into 'brother' ova, which were artificially fertilized and allowed to grow into sterile foeti — the first U-men. Fertilization was simple — too simple. Underwood's plasmic ova mass was highly sensitive. The slightest stimulus or shock was sufficient to fertilize the ova and start them on their way to become umen. It was impossible to carry a colony ova mass into space because the shock of blasting off from Terra always fertilized the whole plasma." *

"And then?"

"Our umen exploded into space. Their first generation obliterated Procyon. Astronomic casualties were trifles. Their supply was inexhaustible. By their second generation they were numberless, ungovernable. The inevitable man-uman war which occurred in their third generation was over in five days. By the year four thousand, men were thought extinct."

Anthon mused: "I believe you. You have answered some questions that have puzzled our historians for millenia. And yet, you've failed to answer the most important question of the moment: just what bearing has all this on the future of the uman race — and on my disposal of the three of you?"

"Have you forgotten that I've been in charge of the Temple for two decades? That has been quite time enough to prepare for this moment."

Lurain watched an uneasy light grow in the Proctor's eyes. "Is it possible you could harm the vitaplasm from this distance . . . Would you *dare*?"

"That depends on you."

The Proctor's eyes narrowed above bloodless cheeks. He wet his lips and scanned the chamber in a rapid furtive survey. His eyes came to rest on The Undrud's desk.

His former superior smiled grimly. "You surely can't think that I would hide the key in the room structure — or even in the desk. If it ever came to a show-down, we knew the human stimulus-response mechanism would be no match for that of a uman — that you could kill me even as I reached for the key. Oh, no. Some four hundred years ago, our best minds spent a generation on that one problem, and the secret has been passed on to each Undrud in turn. But know this, if I die, the key closes, and the vitaplasm dies with me. And for that matter, so will everyone in these rooms. In fact, I believe there is sufficient explosive to destroy the whole sacred city."

Anthon's voice trembled. "I don't believe you."

"It's quite possible you don't. A basic defect in the uman is his rejection of situations for which he has no instinctive response. He either ignores such difficulties completely or overrides them by sheer force of numbers. I think, Anthon, that you might eventually become insane if you had to solve your present problem without outside help. Fortunately for your sanity, I can offer a suggestion."

Lurain and Marin strained forward with the rest.

"Above us," continued the grey-haired man, "the D-13 lies in her cradle, fully provisioned. Anthon, let us bargain. Let those two prisoners take the D-13. I will remain — to enforce the bargain. When the D-13 blasts off, you can do with me what you will."

"And if I don't agree?" cried Anthon.

"Then men and umen die together."

Anthon's pallid lips moved slowly. "Could you really destroy the plasm? Is it conceivable that in another seventy or eighty years not a single uman may remain alive? Could our great civilization wither at the moment it is ready to spring to the next galaxy? Is it really possible that we could die,

when we stand at the threshold of the universe?" His voice trailed off in a mutter that Lurain had to strain to hear: "With these fertile creatures the universe is ours . . . what would the Galactic Council say if I released them . . . how could I justify . . . suppose *he* is lying . . . what would be done with me . . . what should I do . . . what to do . . . what, how . . ."

"Captain Lurain," said the old man quietly.

Lurain looked up with a start.

"Do exactly as I say. Anthon's dilemma is submerging him in an auto-hypnotic stasis; it's contagious, and will soon infect the guards. When that time comes, you can walk out unmolested. Do you know the way back to the D-13?"

Lurain nodded silently.

"Then, for your wife's sake, you will try to make it. No, not just yet."

The officer of the guards was eyeing them uneasily — first his muttering superior, then the last of the Underwoods, then the two prisoners. The uamen under him shifted restlessly.

"We must not subject Anthon to an abrupt stimulus," continued The Undrud softly. "He'd shoot first and think afterwards. After all, in essence, even the most intelligent uman is largely a mass of reflexes. He was intended to be that way. Ratiocination simply isn't his forte. Anthon will know when you go, of course, but he's so deathly afraid of endangering the plasm that I don't think he'll make any move to stop you until the last possible moment. This is the only way. I beg both of you to save your arguments."

The woman's forehead was glistening. "We shall go, father, but only because it is your wish."

"Good girl!" He looked immensely relieved. "Then there remains but one thing to be done."

It seemed to Lurain that only by sheer brute will did the man finally wrench the devouring hunger of his eyes from Marin and turn to him. For a moment The Undrud looked suddenly old and tired; his eyes were bloodshot, wet. But then, as though unleashing one last burst of energy, he pulled himself together. His back stiffened proudly, and his eyes shone. He seemed to behold a marvelous vision, and there was a prophetic timbre in his voice.

"Captain Llewellyn Raines, I give my daughter Marion into your heart

and hands, to take your name and be your wife, to love you and to be loved, and to bear your children. The rest of your lives you will spend within the walls of one ship, and finally there must you die. Train your sons and daughters in the mysteries of deep space, that one day your descendants may claim their rightful heritage, which is not Terra, nor yet this galaxy, but the Universe."

The visiphone in the guard booth beneath the D-13 began to jangle. Acting-Captain Hykane was reaching for the INCOMING button when his trained ears caught another, far more disturbing sound.

His hand halted in midair, and he half rose to his feet.

The visiphone annunciator switched to URGENT.

He bit his lips indecisively and reached over and flicked on the incoming button. But his real attention was outside, and permitted him to attach no real significance to the scene he saw in the screen. He saw Anthon's face as but one among many, and the shouted orders to 'lock the cradle instantly' were buried beneath the barely-detectable sounds from without.

He turned away and dashed from the booth.

The sounds were unmistakable.

All over the forbidden ship above him, vapor locks were spinning shut.

Even as he turned and raced back to his booth, blue flames lashed out from the distant tail jets, and the ship seemed to contract her great loins.

He regained his cubicle in a miraculous burst of speed and clawed at the cradle locking levers.

The D-13 vanished in one hurtling leap up the runway.

The uman stumbled back against the booth wall, where he found himself facing the visiscreen.

In dazed incomprehension he watched the scene.

Anthon's hand held a gun pointed at another, older uman, who had thrust out his hands to the desk on which he was collapsing. Blood gushing from his mouth slurred what he was saying. "Poor fool . . . wasn't one galaxy . . . enough? Detonator keyed . . . to arterial pressure. When my heart stops . . ."

The screen suddenly blurred, and before Hykane could grasp what was happening, his body had become a red pulp among far-flung bits of metal and soaring earth.

Herewith the ordeal of newshawk Rafferty, who stumbled on the scoop of the century and couldn't do a thing about it. There will always be plain, ordinary citizens who can't see anything sensational or newsworthy about a visit by the neighbors. Even if these neighbors happen to drop in from somewhere near Alpha Centauri. If they're agreeable people, nice to talk to, it still isn't news — just an ordinary, homely occasion for a little gossip. Bill Brown gives you a new kind of science fiction story, the homey interplanetary tale, written with quiet humor — and a certain amount of exasperation for Mr. Rafferty.

The Star Ducks

by BILL BROWN

WARD RAFFERTY's long, sensitive newshawk's nose alerted him for a hoax as soon as he saw the old Alsop place. There was no crowd of curious farmers standing around, no ambulance.

Rafferty left *The Times* press car under a walnut tree in the drive and stood for a moment noting every detail with the efficiency that made him *The Times*' top reporter. The old Alsop house was brown, weathered, two-story with cream colored filigree around the windows and a lawn that had grown up to weeds. Out in back were the barn and chicken houses and fences that were propped up with boards and pieces of pipe. The front gate was hanging by one hinge but it could be opened by lifting it. Rafferty went in and climbed the steps, careful for loose boards.

Mr. Alsop came out on the porch to meet him. "Howdy do," he said.

Rafferty pushed his hat back on his head the way he always did before he said: "I'm Rafferty of *The Times*." Most people knew his by-line and he liked to watch their faces when he said it.

"Rafferty?" Mr. Alsop said, and Rafferty knew he wasn't a *Times* reader.

"I'm a reporter," Rafferty said. "Somebody phoned in and said an airplane cracked up around here."

Mr. Alsop looked thoughtful and shook his head slowly.

"No," he said.

Rafferty saw right away that Alsop was a slow thinker so he gave him time, mentally pegging him a taciturn Yankee. Mr. Alsop answered again, "Nooooooooooooo."

The screen door squeaked and Mrs. Alsop came out. Since Mr. Alsop was still thinking, Rafferty repeated the information for Mrs. Alsop, thinking she looked a little brighter than her husband. But Mrs. Alsop shook her head and said, "Nooooooooooooo," in exactly the same tone Mr. Alsop had used.

Rafferty turned around with his hand on the porch railing ready to go down the steps.

"I guess it was just a phony tip," he said. "We get lots of them. Somebody said an airplane came down in your field this morning, straight down trailing fire."

Mrs. Alsop's face lighted up. "Ohhhhhhhhhhh!" she said. "Yes it did but it wasn't wrecked. Besides, it isn't really an airplane. That is, it doesn't have wings on it."

Rafferty stopped with his foot in the air over the top step. "I beg your pardon?" he said. "An airplane came down? And it didn't have wings?"

"Yes," Mrs. Alsop said. "It's out there in the barn now. It belongs to some folks who bend iron with a hammer."

This, Rafferty thought, begins to smell like news again.

"Oh, a helicopter," he said.

Mrs. Alsop shook her head. "No, I don't think it is. It doesn't have any of those fans. But you can go out to the barn and have a look. Take him out Alfred. Tell him to keep on the walk because it's muddy."

"Come along," Mr. Alsop said brightly. "I'd like to look the contraption over again myself."

Rafferty followed Mr. Alsop around the house on the board walk thinking he'd been mixed up with some queer people in his work, some crackpots and some screwballs, some imbeciles and some lunatics, but for sheer dumbness, these Alsops had them all beat.

"Got a lot of chickens this year," Mr. Alsop said. "All fine stock. Minorcas. Sent away for roosters and I've built a fine flock. But do you think chickens'll do very well up on a star, Mr. Rafferty?"

Rafferty involuntarily looked up at the sky and stepped off the boards into the mud.

"Up on a what?"

"I said up on a star." Mr. Alsop had reached the barn door and was trying to shove it open. "Sticks," he said. Rafferty put his shoulder to it and the door slid. When it was open a foot, Rafferty looked inside and he knew he had a story.

The object inside looked like a giant plastic balloon only half inflated so that it was globular on top and its flat bottom rested on the straw-covered floor. It was just small enough to go through the barn door. Obviously it was somebody's crackpot idea of a space ship, Rafferty thought. The headline that flashed across his mind in thirty-six point Bodoni was "Local Farmer Builds Rocket Ship For Moon Voyage."

"Mr. Alsop," Rafferty said hopefully, "you didn't build this thing, did you?"

Mr. Alsop laughed. "Oh, no, I didn't build it. I wouldn't know how to build one of those things. Some friends of ours came in it. Gosh, I wouldn't even know how to fly one."

Rafferty looked at Mr. Alsop narrowly and he saw the man's face was serious.

"Just who are these friends of yours, Mr. Alsop?" Rafferty asked cautiously.

"Well, it sounds funny," Mr. Alsop said, "but I don't rightly know. They don't talk so very good. They don't talk at all. All we can get out of them is that their name is something about bending iron with a hammer."

Rafferty had been circling the contraption, gradually drawing closer to it. He suddenly collided with something he couldn't see. He said "ouch" and rubbed his shin.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Mr. Rafferty," Mr. Alsop said, "they got a gadget on it that won't let you get near, some kind of a wall you can't see. That's to keep boys away from it."

"These friends of yours, Mr. Alsop, where are they now?"

"Oh, they're over at the house," Mr. Alsop said. "You can see them if you want to. But I think you'll find it pretty hard talking to them."

"Russians?" Rafferty asked.

"Oh, no, I don't think so. They don't wear cossacks."

"Let's go," Rafferty said in a low voice and led the way across the muddy barnyard toward the house.

"These folks come here the first time about six years ago," Mr. Alsop said. "Wanted some eggs. Thought maybe they could raise chickens up where they are. Took 'em three years to get home. Eggs spoiled. So the folks turned right around and come back. This time I fixed 'em up a little brooder so they can raise chickens on the way home." He suddenly laughed. "I can just see that little contraption way out there in the sky full of chickens."

Rafferty climbed up on the back porch ahead of Mr. Alsop and went through the back door into the kitchen. Mr. Alsop stopped him before they went into the living room.

"Now, Mr. Rafferty, my wife can talk to these people better than I can, so anything you want to know you better ask her. Her and the lady get along pretty good."

"Okay," Rafferty said. He pushed Mr. Alsop gently through the door into the living room, thinking he would play along, act naïve.

Mrs. Alsop sat in an armchair close to a circulating heater. Rafferty saw the visitors sitting side by side on the davenport, he saw them waving their long, flexible antennae delicately, he saw their lavender faces as expressionless as glass, the round eyes that seemed to be painted on.

Rafferty clutched the door facings and stared.

Mrs. Alsop turned toward him brightly.

"Mr. Rafferty," she said, "these are the people that came to see us in that airplane." Mrs. Alsop raised her finger and both the strangers bent their antennae down in her direction.

"This is Mr. Rafferty," Mrs. Alsop said. "He's a newspaper reporter. He wanted to see your airplane."

Rafferty managed to nod and the strangers curled up their antennae and nodded politely. The woman scratched her side with her left claw.

Something inside Rafferty's head was saying, you're a smart boy, Rafferty, you're too smart to be taken in. Somebody's pulling a whopping, skillful publicity scheme, somebody's got you down for a sucker. Either that or you're crazy or drunk or dreaming.

Rafferty tried to keep his voice casual.

"What did you say their names are, Mrs. Alsop?"

"Well, we don't know," Mrs. Alsop said. "You see they can only make

pictures for you. They point those funny squiggly horns at you and they just think. That makes you think, too — the same thing they're thinking. I asked them what their name is and then I let them think for me. All I saw was a picture of the man hammering some iron on an anvil. So I guess their name is something like Man-Who-Bends-Iron. Maybe it's kind of like an Indian name."

Rafferty looked slyly at the people who bent iron and at Mrs. Alsop.

"Do you suppose," he said innocently, "they would talk to me — or *think* to me?"

Mrs. Alsop looked troubled.

"They'd be glad to, Mr. Rafferty. The only thing is, it's pretty hard at first. Hard for you, that is."

"I'll try it," Rafferty said. He took out a cigarette and lighted it. He held the match until it burned his fingers.

"Just throw it in the coal bucket," Mr. Alsop said.

Rafferty threw the match in the coal bucket.

"Ask these things . . . a . . . people where they come from," he said.

Mrs. Alsop smiled. "That's a very hard question. I asked them that before but I didn't get much of a picture. But I'll ask them again."

Mrs. Alsop raised her finger and both horns bent toward her and aimed directly at her head.

"This young man," Mrs. Alsop said in a loud voice like she was talking to someone hard of hearing, "wants to know where you people come from."

Mr. Alsop nudged Rafferty. "Just hold up your finger when you want your answer."

Rafferty felt like a complete idiot but he held up his finger. The woman whose husband bends iron bent her antenna down until it focused on Rafferty between the eyes. He involuntarily braced himself against the door facings. Suddenly his brain felt as though it were made of rubber and somebody was wringing and twisting and pounding it all out of shape and moulding it back together again into something new. The terror of it blinded him. He was flying through space, through a great white void. Stars and meteors whizzed by and a great star, dazzling with brilliance, white and sparkling stood there in his mind and then it went out. Rafferty's mind was released but he found himself trembling, clutching the door facings. His burning cigarette was on the floor. Mr. Alsop stooped and picked it up.

"Here's your cigarette, Mr. Rafferty. Did you get your answer?"

Rafferty was white.

"Mr. Alsop!" he said. "Mrs. Alsop! This is on the level. These creatures are really from out there in space somewhere!"

Mr. Alsop said: "Sure, they come a long way."

"Do you know what this means?" Rafferty heard his voice becoming hysterical and he tried to keep it calm. "Do you know this is the most important thing that has ever happened in the history of the world? Do you know this is . . . yes it is, it's the biggest story in the world and it's happening to me, do you understand?" Rafferty was yelling. "Where's your phone?"

"We don't have a telephone," Mr. Alsop said. "There's one down at the filling station. But these people are going to go in a few minutes. Why don't you wait and see them off? Already got their eggs and the brooder and feed on board."

"No!" Rafferty gasped. "They can't go in a few minutes! Listen, I've got to phone — I've got to get a photographer!"

Mrs. Alsop smiled.

"Well, Mr. Rafferty, we tried to get them to stay over for supper but they have to go at a certain time. They have to catch the tide or something like that."

"It's the moon," Mr. Alsop said with authority. "It's something about the moon being in the right place."

The people from space sat there demurely, their claws folded in their laps, their antennae neatly curled to show they weren't eavesdropping on other people's minds.

Rafferty looked frantically around the room for a telephone he knew wasn't there. Got to get Joe Pegley at the city desk, Rafferty thought. Joe'll know what to do. No, no. Joe would say you're drunk.

But this is the biggest story in the world, Rafferty's brain kept saying. It's the biggest story in the world and you just stand here.

"Listen, Alsop!" Rafferty yelled. "You got a camera? Any kind of a camera. I *got* to have a camera!"

"Oh, sure," Mr. Alsop said. "I got a fine camera. It's a box camera but it takes good pictures. I'll show you some I took of my chickens."

"No, no! I don't want to see your pictures. I want the camera!"

Mr. Alsop went into the parlor and Rafferty could see him fumbling around on top of the organ.

"Mrs. Alsop!" Rafferty shouted. "I've got to ask lots of questions!"

"Ask away," Mrs. Alsop said cheerily. "They don't mind."

But what could you ask people from space? You got their names. You got what they were here for: eggs. You got where they were from. . . .

Mr. Alsop's voice came from the parlor.

"Ethel, you seen my camera?"

Mrs. Alsop sighed. "No I haven't. You put it away."

"Only trouble is," Mr. Alsop said, "haven't got any films for it."

Suddenly the people from space turned their antennae toward each other for a second and apparently coming to a mutual agreement, got up and darted here and there about the room as quick as fireflies, so fast Rafferty could scarcely see them. They scuttered out the door and off toward the barn. All Rafferty could think was: "My God, they're part bug!"

Rafferty rushed out the door, on toward the barn through the mud, screaming at the creatures to stop. But before he was half way there the gleaming plastic contraption slid out of the barn and there was a slight hiss. The thing disappeared into the low hanging clouds.

All there was left for Rafferty to see was a steaming place in the mud and a little circle of burnt earth. Rafferty sat down in the mud, a hollow, empty feeling in his middle, with the knowledge that the greatest story in the world had gone off into the sky. No pictures, no evidence, no story. He dully went over in his mind the information he had:

"Mr. and Mrs. Man-Who-Bends-Iron. . . ." It slowly dawned on Rafferty what that meant. Smith! Man-who-Bends-Iron on an anvil. Of course that was Smith. . . . "Mr. and Mrs. Smith visited at the Alfred Alsop place Sunday. They returned to their home in the system of Alpha Centauri with two crates of hatching eggs."

Rafferty got to his feet and shook his head. He stood still in the mud and suddenly his eyes narrowed and you knew that Rafferty brain was working — that Rafferty brain that always came up with the story. He bolted for the house and burst in the back door.

"Alsop!" he yelled. "Did those people pay you for those eggs?"

Mr. Alsop was standing on a chair in front of the china closet, still hunting for the camera.



"Oh, sure," he said. "In a way they did."

"Let me see the money!" Rafferty demanded.

"Oh, not in money," Mr. Alsop said. "They don't have any money. But when they were here six years ago they brought us some eggs of their own in trade."

"Six years ago!" Rafferty moaned. Then he started. "Eggs! What kind of eggs?"

Mr. Alsop chuckled a little. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "We called them star ducks. The eggs were star shaped. And you know we set them under a hen and the star points bothered the old hen something awful."

Mr. Alsop climbed down from the chair.

"Star ducks aren't much good though. They look something like a little hippopotamus and something like a swallow. But they got six legs. Only two of them lived and we ate them for Thanksgiving."

Rafferty's brain still worked, grasping for that single fragment of evidence that would make his city editor believe — that would make the world believe.

Rafferty leaned closer. "Mr. Alsop," he almost whispered, "you wouldn't know where the skeletons of the star ducks are?"

Mr. Alsop looked puzzled. "You mean the bones? We gave the bones to the dog. That was five years ago. Even the dog's dead now. I know where his bones are though."

Rafferty picked up his hat like a man in a daze.

"Thanks, Mr. Alsop," he said dully. "Thanks."

Rafferty stood on the porch and put on his hat. He pushed it back on his head. He stared up into the overcast; he stared until he felt dizzy like he was spiralling off into the mist, spiralling off the earth like a celestial barber pole.

Mr. Alsop opened the door and came out, wiping the dust off a box camera with his sleeve.

"Oh, Mr. Rafferty," he said. "I found the camera."



